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**THE SON OF THE OTTER**





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It gave him pleasure to feel the pressure of her small hands,  
to have, at times, the warm breath blowing  
against his cheek. *See page 109*

# THE SON OF THE OTTER

BY  
**GEORGE VAN SCHAIK**  
*Author of "Sweetapple Cove"*



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**THE SON OF THE OTTER**



# THE SON OF THE OTTER

## CHAPTER I

### THE NEW AGENT FOR THE GRAND LAC

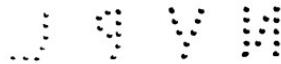
AFTER three days of wonderful fishing Mr. Smith returned from the Fifth Falls of the Mistassini. No houses were there at the time and the great river roared down in a wilderness, crashing over the stupendous cataract and hastening towards the great shallow Lac St. Jean, which engulfs seven big rivers and sends their sandy waters hurtling over the Grand Discharge towards the Saguenay, the St. Lawrence and the sea.

The canoe held a fine string of the land-locked salmon of the country, the ouananiche men come from afar to seek. Pete Calot and Antoine Magloire, pure Montagnais Indians, who were guiding him, were delighted with Mr. Smith. Naturally enough they had been rather silent on the first day, for it takes time to penetrate an Indian's reserve. But on the second they had ap-

preciated his skill as a fisherman, his handiness about the camp, and his sharing with them the contents of his little pocket flask. The sportsman had grown enthusiastic in regard to the beautiful freedom of their life, manifested the most intense interest in their tales of trapping, and led them into long narrations, while they sat before the camp-fire in the evening, of long journeys in the *Grand Nord*. To them he deplored the unkind fate that held him bound to the sordid life of cities. Take *Grand Lac Mistassini*, for instance! What would he not have given for the leisure to behold such a wonderful sheet of water?

"*Oui, Monsieur,*" repeated Antoine. "It is more as one hundred mile long an more as ten mile wide. Great big island in him middle. Like one great big sea. *Lac Saint Jean* heem a little lac by de side of *Grand Lac!*"

Mr. Smith opened the flask again. He was very temperate, undoubtedly, for he hardly touched the contents and gave the men just enough to warm the cockles of their hearts. He plied them with many questions, learning that they had just returned from that country and would go back to it for the next hunting. Little by little



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he found out a great deal about the big lake, and the post of the Hudson's Bay Company, and the agent in charge. The latter, according to Pete, was a fine liberal fellow who, over there in the back of beyond, managed to treat the men of the brigades, on the day of departure, to powerful *ishkouteuapui*, a refreshment that burned the throat and made a man warm inside. Ay, it was strong and of the best.

Mr. Smith was greatly interested. The flask, carefully husbanded, lasted till very late hours, since its owner didn't seem personally to care for its contents. If he was, to some extent, infringing the laws in giving the stuff to Antoine and Pete this must have rested lightly on his conscience. There was not nearly enough to do more than loosen tongues and encourage confidence.

They reached Roberval rather late in the evening of the third day, and Mr. Smith chanced to meet the agent of the Company at the reservation of Pointe Bleue, who had happened to drive over. Curiously enough, the two foregathered at once and, a few minutes later, held conversation in Mr. Smith's room at the hotel.

On the next morning Mr. Smith drove over to

the Reservation to visit the Indian settlement. He dropped into the Post building and the agent politely showed him the warehouse in which the trade goods and fur were kept. They closed the door behind them.

"This," said the agent, "is one of the boxes we were speaking about."

Mr. Smith looked at the case. It was marked JIM BARRY and addressed to the Company Post on Grand Lac Mistassini.

Mr. Smith was a very handy man. With the blade of an ax and a hammer he rapidly opened the box.

"That's it. I expected as much," he said, after pulling out some excelsior and uncovering a couple of dozen bottles filled with a liquid as clear and limpid as water.

The agent obliged him with a corkscrew and the bottle, once opened, spread forth a fragrance of powerful alcohol.

"You will please smash up all that stuff," said Mr. Smith, emptying the bottle through a crack in the rough floor.

"I sure will," said the agent, who was a determined temperance advocate. "Nothing'll please

## NEW AGENT FOR THE GRAND LAC 5

me better. To think there's five more cases like it, and it costs the company all of fifteen cents a pound to lug up there. No wonder there ain't much fur coming. I've been suspecting Jim!"

Two days later Mr. Smith found himself in Montreal. A man was shown up to his room and requested to sit down while Mr. Smith finished a letter. The man sat on the edge of a chair, a rather thin one that seemed overburdened, for the sitter was all of six feet high and his somewhat ill-fitting and brand new clothes showed much bulging of shoulders and biceps, while the thin trousers hinted at thighs and legs like sections of birchen logs, but shapely withal. For some time the man remained perfectly quiet. Then he looked about him in some embarrassment. Finally he rose and, on tiptoe, went to the window and opened it, after which he spat out and also cast away some tobacco whose virtues had by no means been entirely exhausted. He did not notice that Mr. Smith was observing him keenly. When he reached his chair again, stepping very silently but with creaking boots, he appeared to be much relieved.

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Then Mr. Smith looked up, putting down his pen.

"And so you're Pete McLeod," he said, briefly.

"Uh huh," answered the man, nodding.

"Just come over, Pete!"

The man rose and came to the table. Mr. Smith unfolded a map. On the upper edge of it he placed a finger.

"This is the place," he said.

McLeod also advanced a large brown finger.

"I see. 'Bout half way to the Bay. Is the map any good?" he asked.

"Fair in some places. Done after Low's first survey. The lake's all right but you can see that most of the rivers are only dotted. But anyway it gives you a good idea of the country. You're to start in two weeks. Ready, are you?"

"Uh huh," assented McLeod.

"Fellow up there's played the devil. Taken to having raw alcohol sent up to him. Indians say the hunting's good. The show of fur's rotten, very bad. You're to go up and pack him home. It's a chance for you to fix things right for the Company and make a good Post of it again. If you make good you can come back once every

[REDACTED]

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three or four years. If you don't there's plenty others we can send. It's a good show for the right man. You'll pay your own prices for pelts, always remembering what it costs the Company to get goods up there. Now it's up to you."

McLeod merely nodded again, for this was straight talk. The next few minutes were taken up in brief explanations and Mr. Smith handed him a letter for the agent at Pointe Bleue, a ticket to Roberval and a small sum of money.

"Wish you luck," finally said Mr. Smith. "When you see Jim Barry slink off with the returning brigade just put the looks of the thing in your pipe and smoke it. The Company wants men!"

The gentleman struck the flimsy hotel table a rather hard blow with his fist, which he afterwards opened and pushed towards McLeod who met it with an exceedingly large and capable paw. The man realized that it was quite an honor to be allowed to shake hands with Mr. Smith.

"I'm liable ter try hard, sir," he said.

"That's what we expect," said Mr. Smith, cutting the interview short with a wave of his hand towards the door.

Pete McLeod found his way to the street. He looked at a very substantial silver watch and found that he had been for twenty-seven minutes with Mr. Smith. To him there was nothing wonderful in the fact that, in this short time, he had accepted exile to a distant land of which he knew little and promised to do his best to build up again an important post. The thing that aroused his admiration was the power and the greatness of the Company which could cover the whole of Canada, even to its remotest parts, with establishments larded over by men supreme in their districts, large or small, and unerringly follow their doings from afar, giving blame or praise, rewarding effort and success and eliminating the weak. He didn't really know who Mr. Smith was, but it was evident that Mr. Smith knew all about Pete. In a dozen words the man had commented on his actions in Northern Winnipeg and shown familiarity with Pete's latest place in Alaskan borders. He seemed to know that Pete had returned to the Quebec country after an absence of some years, to see an old father. Pete had expected to start back next week. Now he was being sent off to a country three hundred miles north of Lake St.

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Jean. These rapid shifts were all in the game.

McLeod went to the railway station to take the next train for Quebec. He sat there for two hours before leaving. To him railroads were rather kittle things, and the time tables savored of hieroglyphics. At last he entered a second class car, with two exceedingly large pack-bags that represented his possessions of a wordly nature.

In Quebec he wandered about for a time, during the afternoon. To him streets were still wonderful works of man. The river, from the Dufferin Terrace, was a marvelous sight. It is perhaps one of the most beautiful views in the world. But soon he strolled through the streets again, looking into shops, gazing at horses and carriages, wondering at the dresses of women, marveling at the fact that people could live together all huddled up like muskrats in a mud bank. Then he went to a small hotel, ate a meal that surprised even a waitress accustomed to the appetites of lumbermen and hunters, and went to bed exceedingly late. It must have been at least ten o'clock. At half past three he awoke and, striking a match, looked at his watch. Fearing to sleep too long

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he opened the window and looked out upon the dark street. Passers-by were few and far between but the time did not appear long. There was something in this big city, even asleep, that impressed him. He was conscious of a faint hum that was the breathing of a slumbering world. In the great woods the nights were seldom utterly silent, but the sounds were all familiar ones. Here, from the other side of the vast river, came noises from some night-toiling factory at Levis. Wires on telegraph poles vibrated strangely. A clock high up in the spire of a church sent forth four brazen strokes. Upon the water of the great stream a light appeared, coming nearer, very slowly. Dimly he distinguished something that must have been a great scow or raft, gliding by. Upon it a dog barked, suddenly, and he heard voices of men. After this the silence became painfully acute till his ears again caught that throbbing over at Levis. A policeman passed in the street, in a very leisurely walk. A couple of cats scurried away. It was all tremendously interesting but gave him no desire for a more prolonged stay in civilization.

He was missing the smell of the woods. The

## **NEW AGENT FOR THE GRAND LAC 11**

smoke of the wilderness was aromatic; the leaves and the barks and the grasses gave out emanations that made a man breathe deep and long. But here the smoke was flying grime and the odors were obnoxious.

A man came down the street, carefully avoiding the narrow sidewalk. The highway was none too broad for him as he lurched along. This carried Pete's thoughts north towards the Hudson's Bay country.

"I got to go up there and hand the man a letter. He'll read it and kinder look at me funny, after he knows he's fired. Wonder how he's goin' to take it?"

He was utterly unafraid, of course. If that agent should be crusty and inclined to fight over the matter Pete would be entirely agreeable. But if the fellow took it hard, in silence, there would be a few long days to be spent before the brigade returned. He might turn out to be mean, and say nasty things, in a sneaking way, and then if he happened to be a small chap of the kind a man can't very well lay his hands on, things would be disagreeable. Pete began to hope he was tall and wide across the body.

Finally he opened the door of his room, having dressed slowly, and carried down his bags. In the office of the hotel, on the ground floor, he found himself alone. Tobacco was a fine thing, of course, but it was astonishing how badly it affected the atmosphere of the place. The collection of ancient butts on the floor was altogether too aggressive. He tried to open the front door but it was locked. He did not realize that the reason of this lay in the requirements of certain formalities on the part of departing guests.

Pete, in an uncomfortable chair, was beginning to nod when a grubby man came in with a large bucket and mop; his eyes wandered vaguely and sleepily over the *voyageur*, without surprise. An elephant strayed in the place would scarcely have awakened his curiosity. To Pete's questions he replied only in monosyllables, while he waged bitter war against the decorations of the floor, pushing his mop with considerable energy and turning the handle of the wringer attached to his pail as if it had been an instrument of torture. Finally he vanished and a drowsy clerk came in. Pete insisted upon the immediate payment of his bill.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

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"Ain't going to have breakfast?" asked the young man.

"Uh huh," grunted Pete. "Got to have some fresh air first."

He paid his reckoning and went out. The life of Quebec was beginning to pulse again. A policeman showed him the way to the station of the Quebec and Lake St. John railway, that had only been open for traffic since a year or two. There he deposited his two huge bags, inquired anxiously about the train, and went away again. A very dirty little restaurant some way off suggested the possibility of refreshment, and held the obvious advantage of possessing windows opening in plain view of the track. The train could not possibly start without his seeing the engine coupled. The fact that it was not due to leave for over an hour gave him added confidence.

He hurried over his breakfast, eating two portions of tepid beans with plenty of bread and butter. The tea was strong and hot, and he emptied the pot.

In a few minutes he returned to the station and sat upon one of his bags, smoking his pipe in great comfort. For the first time since leaving Mr.

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Smith he felt really safe. The evening would see him on the shores of the big lake. After that there would be nothing but canoes to bother about. They started when a fellow was good and ready.

Finally the train left and he stretched out his long legs with a sigh of satisfaction.

"Nothin' like makin' sure of things," he told himself.

During the rest of the day's journey he looked out of the window most of the time, his eyes watering from the collection of many cinders. He was getting in the woods again. There were spruces and firs and birches, after the long rise over the farming lands was overcome. Then came rivers, and lakes, and rocky hills. He could just smell them.

Late in the afternoon, as he looked out of the window, a great expanse of water appeared, far below him, in the misty distance. The train was descending a steep grade, with brakes creaking. The further shores of the lake were not visible. It looked like a big sea. But he knew that beyond it, to the north, lay the country he was bound for. For a moment he felt a confused sense of uncertainty. Like most really strong men Pete

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was never cocksure. Ahead were a myriad lakes, rivers, mountains, foaming cataracts, and at the end of the journey an unknown place where the work would begin. And work there, as elsewhere, would mean fighting, and toiling, and sweating and freezing. But, more than all, it would mean putting the thing through and coming out on top. Perhaps, a few years hence, he might meet Mr. Smith again. And then the latter would say, in that quiet cold voice of his:

“Hello, McLeod, you didn’t do so bad!”

And Pete knew that this would pay for everything. He deemed such words an ample reward, the fulfillment of hopes, the attainment of his ambition. When the train finally stopped at Roberval he lifted up his two great bags as if they had been feathers. At last he would be the man in charge, the fellow responsible for a Post. Yes, out of the millions of square miles to the north of him he would conquer those words.

“‘Not so bad, Pete,’ that’s what he’ll say,” he repeated to himself, eagerly.

## CHAPTER II

### A FLOWER OF THE NASCAUPEES

THOSE two weeks went by rapidly. Long evenings were spent with the agent at Pointe Bleue, who proved to be a kindred soul and received him with open arms. Together they reckoned up the supplies that were to be taken. They bothered very little about the things that were to go. The important business was to decide in regard to whatever might be dispensed with. They had never heard of the great Arctic explorer who, after weighing a pocket-handkerchief on his scales, spent a long time and deep thought on the advisability of taking it or leaving it behind, but they would have understood and sympathized with him.

Pete, of course, had been an object of close scrutiny on the part of the men selected for the next brigade to Grand Lac. As a result of their investigations the loading of the canoes went on smoothly and carefully, and the *voyageurs* were

## A FLOWER OF THE NASCAUPEES 17

only reasonably intoxicated at the start, which took place in the early afternoon. Another night's delay would have meant more abominable and illicit liquor. There were, naturally enough, some protests against such a late departure. Yet, strangely enough, these were rather suddenly hushed by Pete's method of sticking his hands deep in his pockets and staring at the speakers as if, for the first time in his life, he were beholding some strange animal. It was disconcerting, to say the least. What can you do to a man who refuses to talk, points the way towards the canoe, and gently comes towards you with the evident ability to grab you by the collar, lift you up, and dump you down on your war-bag?

From the shore a little powder was burnt in ancient muskets as a farewell. Indian women waved their colored handkerchiefs. Pete took a seat in the middle of one of the canoes. For the time being he was altogether too big a man to take a paddle. His men would have respected him less if he had made himself one of them. The day was a warm one and the lake very calm, so that men perspired profusely and felt that life was hard and weary. When they camped at the

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mouth of the Ashapmouchouan that evening, Pete collected all the paddles and placed them in his tent, and the men became angry though their respect increased. They had naturally made plans to return in the empty canoes to the reservation, for a last night of revelry and leave taking. They entertained praise-worthy intentions of returning at day-break, which, of course, would have served towards the further paving of an unmentionable place. With plentiful grumbling the crowd made hot tea and absorbed vast quantities. Also at night many kept on rising to swallow great gulps of water from their big pint dippers.

In the morning Pete was fairly indulgent. Under pretence of hefting big packs he helped considerably in the loading of all the duffle and the canoes on carts which finally started off on the long and abominably sandy road to Portage à l'Ours, which was reached quite late.

At night they all slept quite well, this time, and the real departure took place fairly early. One may come down the chief branch from Grand Lac in little over a week. The going up, however, is another matter, and the road taken is entirely different, for the avoidance of hundreds of miles

## A FLOWER OF THE NASCAUPEES 19

of rapids. In a very few days things were going like clockwork. As the men became more willing Pete proved rather friendly and helpful. The early rising and building of fires, the reloading of canoes with the duffle placed ashore and protected for the night with tarpaulins, the hurried eating of a substantial breakfast and the start, after the chief had cast an expert look on the ground to see that nothing had been left behind, took place day after day with the smoothness of well-oiled machinery. A little later the real, hard work began. They were poling up rapids now, or lining the canoes up with ropes. They toiled against the easier currents of dead waters and lakes, and over the many portages that required a number of trips back and forth before everything was carried over. The men bore huge loads, sweating and slapping at the flies swarming on wrists and faces. Thus, day by day, they progressed along the big river to the mouth of the Chigobiche, where they left the rough main stream. Thence to Lake Chigobiche, thirty miles long, and over a long portage to the river of the Crooked Hill. Again they carried to the Nicaubau lakes and toiled manfully on over the height of land to Lake Obatagooman. But

after this came a wilderness of lakes and rivers that finally brought them to a wide inlet into Grand Lac, which was like a mighty arm of an ocean dotted with great blue islands in the distance. Here, for several days, they were wind-bound, but cared little, for all the hard work was over. Nothing was left but the long paddle along the shore, keeping very near the land as a precaution against sudden squalls, so they sat under their tents, contentedly, and mended clothing and shoepacks, telling and listening to interminable stories of long ago. Also there was a fresh gumming of canoes, an inspection of bales and bags and wooden boxes. In the lake some of the men put out deep set-lines armed with huge hooks and baited with foot-long fishes. In the morning they pulled out dead or half-drowned lake-trout, great fork-tails of incredible size.

Finally the wind abated, very suddenly, and they started at once along the eastern shore of the inland sea. Two days of this saw the canoes turning sharply inshore, during the early afternoon. They were an hour away from the post, but formalities could not be neglected. Razors were brought out and wiry beards were shed.

## A FLOWER OF THE NASCAUPEES 21

From the war bags the best clothing was pulled forth. New moccasins adorned the feet, high ones that were fastened beneath the knee with garters of vivid hues.

When they started again, an hour later, the men were singing and joking. Easily moved to mirth, their loud guffaws sounded strangely in the wilderness of great waters and unending shores that looked as if until then they had never been beheld of men. At this time their progress became a race, and the brawny arms wielding the long spruce paddles dug in the water as if they had been walking-beams propelled by steam. The fat had been tried out of them in the sweat they had shed upon portages, and the strong bodies were in wonderful training. But when they reached the point the gait became solemn and dignified, the canoes filing along in accurate alignment, with the august stateliness of some churchly procession.

Then some of the men sniffed, with the Indian's ability to detect the smell of wood-smoke a long distance off. After this the leading canoeman gave a cheer that was many times repeated by the others as they came in sight of a couple of great

log buildings, about which were clustered many tents. They saw puffs of white smoke, and presently the reports of the guns came, rolling among the surrounding hillsides and awakening lingering echoes.

"What's the matter with the flag?" wondered Pete.

But presently he saw men bearing the small bundle and attaching it to the halyards. The colors of the Company broke out and began to ascend the mast, slowly. Half way up it seemed to catch. No, it hung there, motionless, and the songs of the *voyageurs* were halted and the swiftly moving paddles were dipped more softly while the canoes took up the gait of penitents moving towards a shrine.

Pete was the first to land, by right of his position. Then the others beached and came up, leaning on their paddles, waiting. Among the crowd ashore there were a few half-breeds, but the majority were pure Montagnais and Nascaupees, mostly very dark of skin, with complexions differing widely from those of the Plains Indians. Chiefly they were tall and sturdy men, the women and children keeping somewhat in the background.

## A FLOWER OF THE NASCAUPEES 23

"*Quey, quey!*" Pete saluted them.

The words of greeting were repeated in chorus. It was very evident that these Indians were glad indeed to see him.

"What about Jim Barry?" he asked.

An old man held up his finger, to attract his attention. Then he pointed to a tongue of land that jutted out into the lake. The waters were very calm and glassy, kissed here and there by tiny wind-flaws that just ruffled the surface. Upon the tiny promontory, under a few shadowing trees that had been allowed to remain there, Pete saw a rude cross made of sawn branches tied together. He walked towards it and looked at the newly made grave. By the side of it there was an older one.

"That Jim Barry," said the man, who had followed him. "This one Barry's woman."

"It may be better for the poor chap," commented Pete.

While the men were unloading the canoes, willingly helped by all the Indian population, the new agent asked for details. The older men crowded around. It was easy to see that they were somewhat nervous. This was a new man;

they didn't know him. Doubtless they feared that Jim Barry's demise might be viewed with suspicion. In short sentences, corroborated by many nods, Pete heard their tale.

Yes! The woman had died at the falling of the leaves. She used to weep much because one little child had passed away years ago. Then Barry took to shutting himself up in the Post building. Whenever he came out he was very shaky as to his hands. The Indian who spoke gave an excellent imitation of the tremor induced by much strong drink. Also Barry ate very little. Daily he grew much thinner, until his face looked like the edge of an ax, and his eyes were sunken deep. But he lived through the winter, somehow, and when the hunters returned from the trapping he hardly seemed to understand their needs. Yet he had braced up, after a time, and the first brigade had come soon after the melting of the ice, when he was much better for some weeks. But a fortnight before Pete's arrival Barry had taken a hatchet and smashed up many boxes, hunting hard for something. Then, with the weapon in his hand, he had run after a woman who looked in. Fortunately he had tripped over a spruce

## A FLOWER OF THE NASCAUPEES 25

root and fallen to the ground. It was easy to see that he was mad, wherefore they had not wanted to do him any harm, because it was certain that he was crazy and therefore in the hands of God. But of course they had been compelled to hold him, and it had taken many strong men, who had carried him to his bed. There he refused food and his tongue became thick and he was very wild. A day came when he rose out of bed, but his head was hanging down on his breast, and it looked as if a little child could have pushed him over. He had tottered over to the little point and lain down on the ground. They had watched him for a long time and towards evening, as he did not move, some of them had gone there. But before they reached the place a dog ran out among the trees. He sat down on his hind-quarters, very quick, and suddenly bayed like Maigan the wolf. Then the men had put a tarpaulin over the body, because it was falling night, and—and—some things were very unlucky. But in the morning, after the sun had risen, they had dug a grave. It was none of their fault. They were sorry. It had been a bad thing for them.

Pete looked at the men who had spoken. His

experience of the northern Indian was extensive. There could not be the slightest doubt in his mind that they were telling the truth.

"The white man Barry was very ill," he said, "and now he is dead. I am the new agent, come to live here. I will look over your debts. Also I will look at all the goods that are left. I bring much with me. In a few days you will come to me for what you want."

He turned on his heel, leaving the impression of a man who listened quietly but was chary of useless words.

"He is broad in the body," said an old man, "and he knows the truth when he hears it. Therefore it will always be well to talk straight to him. Also he looks at men in the eye. It is good."

Pete was walking off to the log building, where he found that the brigade cook had gone to work to prepare a meal, of which he partook in solitary grandeur.

There was little fur to be sent back and there would be no more until next spring. The first brigade to come after the melting of the ice had brought home the bales of the winter's hunting.

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Their meagerness had awakened the suspicions of men like Mr. Smith. Hence the sending of an extra brigade. Pete therefore allowed the men but a few days of rest, during which the new goods were stored, and sent them back laden only with the necessary provisions for the return trip. He inquired about a man to cook for him and make himself generally useful but found nothing better than a rather decrepit Indian whose first culinary efforts were weird.

"I'll have to do better than that," he told himself, on the morning succeeding the day upon which the brigade, with canoes floating high out of water, had departed for the south. They would return by the chief branch, reaching home a week after leaving the inlet, for at times they would shoot rapids at the rate of nearly fifty miles a day, after passing the height of land.

He postponed his search for more competent help, deciding that he could easily do his own cooking for a few days, and there were far more important things to think about. The disorder in the store-room was appalling. He described it as a hurrah's nest. It was evident that Barry, for some months, had kept no accounts of any sort.

There was no inventory of goods on hand. When he sought to investigate the debts of the hunters he was appalled. There was a book for that purpose but nothing had been entered in it for half a year.

"They'll find out I know nothing about it," he reflected, gloomily, seeing himself obliged to take the word of a large and assorted lot of semi-savages in regard to what they owed. He did not consider them as a particularly dishonest bunch but knew that the temptation would be irresistible. What would a rough gang of white folks do under the same circumstances?

Well! He'd put it through some way or other. There would naturally be some loss, and he was starting under a heavy handicap. This, however, did not irk him long. From his pack he took a well-worn pair of overalls, rolled the sleeves of his flannel shirt above his massive forearms, and went to work in the storehouse to take an account of stock. This required the investigating of a large number of boxes and bags. With the help of his old man he weighed things and noted them down. The opening of one large box gave him a start. It was very light, which

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was peculiar. Its contents, protected from moths by much pepper and spices, made him open his mouth and gasp. He lifted out a number of pelts such as, at the big London fur auctions, make otherwise steady merchants bid crazily against each other.

"Barry wanted to go home next year. Kept this stuff from the Company, he did. Could have retired fine on that. The—the . . ."

Pete spat on the ground, for an evil taste had come in his mouth. He could understand a man drinking himself to death, and could even excuse a coward and an incompetent. But the idea of trading the Company's goods for prime pelts and then stealing them positively nauseated him.

Yet it made him very happy to find them. He would explain about this lot when he sent it on, next Spring, and it would go, if not to his own credit, at least to the account of the Post. He repacked the stuff with the utmost care and went on with his investigations. There were woeful deficiencies in the matter of tea and tobacco. It was lucky indeed a second brigade had come. After working hard for many hours he went and leaned against the door-post of the storehouse,

for a moment's rest while he cut himself a pipeful of plug.

A feeling of contentment had come over the man. The wonderful waters extended far before him, ending in a soft purple line representing the thin islands that nearly split the length of the lake. The scene was one of gentle grandeur, of sunlit beauty, of the restfulness that seems intensified in places seldom desecrated by the hands of men. And it was a splendid place that the Indians had chosen for the grave of Barry, exposed as it was to the wonderful glory of the fading suns that gilded and crimsoned the world on the eve of every fine day.

"This," he decided, "is the place for me,"

His pipe once alight he returned to work, eagerly, glad to toil at the upbuilding of his future. Some wide shelves on the walls of the store-room needed cleaning and he tackled them. Luck would have it that he knocked over a rusty old pistol, hidden behind some boxes. It fell to the floor, exploded, and sent a large and greasy bullet through his leg. The Indians camped on the beach ran in, nervously, for Barry's actions had kept them on the jump for a long time. They

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found Pete sitting on the floor, holding the calf of his leg in a tight grip and looking pale and very foolish.

They all joined in the consultation. With a jack-knife they dug out of the wound a piece of the blue overalls, after which they applied a variety of remedies, among which were cobwebs, that had grown all too plentiful under Barry's administration, together with exhausted quids of tobacco and some bruised leaves highly recommended by an old Indian woman very wise in such matters.

In spite of this treatment, or, perhaps, in virtue of it, Pete's leg soon swelled up ever so big and a high fever came upon him during which he said things that no Montagnais or Nascaupees could understand. This was hardly surprising when one considers that it was child's talk in Gaelic, absorbed in his early youth at Cape Breton, whence he originally hailed.

None of the Indians knew anything about him, but they had already learned to think well of him. Moreover they were disconsolate because this illness was highly inconvenient. It speaks well for their honesty that not one of them would have

helped himself from the store-room, although they knew that the key was in the pocket of the perforated overalls. If he could not give them their debt they would have to travel over to the Rupert River and go far north, to a Post where they were not accustomed to deal. Also, of course, they could have the choice of starving to death, for the store was the Company's cache, and sacred.

During the day the room was generally filled with Indians who sat upon the floor, leaning against the walls and smoking strong pipes, with the greatest solemnity. But after a time his attendants dwindled to one, who was a fine tall young woman christened Marie but better known as Uapukun, which is the Indian name of the wild rose.

She sat by him quietly, with inexhaustible patience, giving him the water he was always craving for, and the food that he rebelled against. She wiped the sweat from his face, paid no attention when he seemed to swear at her, and, when he would have left his bed, restrained him gently with lithe muscles of steel. One day big tears ran down his weather-burnt cheeks, while he babbled foolishly, and she bent over him, tenderly,



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and stroked his poor thin face, which shows that there may be a few points in common between a gently nurtured lady and an ignorant savage that has never even seen a white man's village.

## CHAPTER III

### THE JOINING OF HANDS

It took quite a number of days for Pete to regain his consciousness. For a long time he stared unbelievingly at the ceiling, with that sense of being born anew in a strange land which comes to those who awaken from prolonged delirium. Then his head turned and, in startled fashion, he looked at the girl who was sitting near his bunk. She was engaged in beading a gaudy shoe-pack as she sat upon an upturned oleomargarine tub. Close at hand, looking very solemn and preternaturally grave, a rotund infant squatted on the floor, unprofitably employed in seeking to obtain nourishment from a fat brown thumb.

She appeared to be taken by surprise as, lifting her head, she realized that he was looking at her intelligently.

"Who are you?" he inquired, weakly, showing that he was much puzzled.

"Me Marie," she replied. "Injuns call Uapukun."

[REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

"And that kid?" he continued, pointing to the child.

"Him Ahteck."

"That means the Caribou. He ain't much of a big bull yet, is he? Who does he belong to?"

For an instant the girl seemed to hesitate, but when she spoke she answered quickly that he was her little brother.

Pete looked at her, searchingly, but her face was as of graven stone.

"How old are you?"

"Me nineteen. Him four year old," she replied, and rose from her seat to get him an evil-smelling concoction that was simmering on the small stove.

In spite of his weakness he was able to note the lithe grace of her figure and the abundance of the black shining tresses she had fastened up like those of a white woman. It was a raven-hued crown surmounting a queenly head. In the yellow moccasins her feet were small, and Pete knew that nothing had ever misshapen them.

"My, but you're a beauty!" he thought, and feebly inquired about her people.

It appeared that her parents had died long ago.

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She was a Nascaupee and mentioned a region he had never heard of, somewhere this side of Michikamau.

"How do you live?" he asked.

"Me the servant of Barry's woman," she told him. "When the woman die I no longer work for Barry. Me no like."

This was all that Pete needed to know. The girl evidently belonged to the flotsam that drifts through the north, cast about by virtue of chance or accident. Barry's wife who, he had gathered, was a good woman, probably knew all about her and doubtless she was all right. The former agent's wife had come across the girl somehow, with that young one, and had probably found her a willing servant who worked hard for little or no wage but her keep.

"Why didn't I see you when I first came here?" he asked.

"Me didn't know if you would want me," she answered, quietly. "After Barry die me put the keys there, on little table. You find 'em. Also you know much tobacco gone and much tea. Maybe you think I take 'em?"

There was the faintest approach to an air of

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haughtiness about the girl, as she spoke, and Pete looked at her, curiously. Then his thin hand went out and rested upon her own.

"No, Uapukun. I'll gamble on you every time."

At this she blushed a little, and went off to get him food which, to her delight, he took eagerly. After this the man lay back, quite exhausted, and slept peacefully while the blood of his life renewed coursed hard through his veins, bringing strength.

During the time of his recovery, which was long, Pete found the girl simply invaluable. She knew the debt of every Indian at the Post, and, better still, could tell who were the trustworthy ones and those one had to be careful about. One may not let them have everything they ask for, since they will take all they can get and waste a lot of stuff, but one has to trust them to the extent of their absolute needs or, at least, of what the winter's trapping will be likely to pay for.

Pete was compelled to remain in bed for a long time before his leg permitted of full use but, thanks to Uapukun, the business affairs of the Post went on first-rate. She would come in with

the account books, and long talks about the dealings followed.

"Jack Janvier him good man. Want him debt now. Travel very far to hunting ground. Him say has more as hundred skins in the book."

The agent would take up the book and finally discover, after turning over some pages, that Jack had a credit of eighty-seven dollars. Then the two would carefully look over the list of the man's needs, written out by Pete with a stubby, oft-moistened pencil, as Uapukun enumerated them on her fingers. He would entrust her with the key of the store-room and she picked out the goods, handling bags of flour and piled-up sides of fat pork with wonderful ease. Then Jack would carry them out to the edge of the lake, in terrific loads, his back bent against the strain of the tump-line, a proud man, knowing that the next year's debt would be small, owing to all the skins that had been in that marvelous book.

But there were also those who had to be haggled with, in long speeches, in which tiny slices of English or French were sandwiched between great portions of Montagnais, a language the Nascaupees also use, with the slight local variations that occur

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at every other camping-ground. Some of them had been merely unfortunate in the great game of chance that is trapping, and were liberally helped out. The lazy wastrels, however, had to be sternly threatened with refusal of credit, and their demands were cut down ruthlessly. By the middle of August most of the Indians had departed for their distant hunting grounds, those remaining consisting merely of a few families trapping within a hundred miles or so, who still had plenty of time for the journey.

Pete was now well and strong again, though very slightly lame. There was little to do now in the way of trade. The man busied himself with some needed repairs to the log-house, toiled at the great provision of fire-wood to be laid up against the coming winter, and, from some boards made in a saw-pit worked out a few useful articles of furniture. The old Indian whose cookery had proved disastrous was put to less important toil and Uapukun held sway in the kitchen.

Pete realized how faithfully she had cared for him. When she bore dishes into the sitting room he would look at her, cogitating deeply with the utmost seriousness. Then he might say a few

words and, according to their nature, would be answered frankly, with splendid dark eyes looking into his own, or more demurely, with head bent and the girl's gaze directed to the floor at her feet.

As the leaves were beginning to put on a golden tint, among the birches and poplars, a canoe came down from the northern end of the lake, on a flying trip, having traveled all the way from Rupert Factory. The man who sat in the middle was a parson.

Pete had come down to the beach to meet him. The newcomer jumped out nimbly, stamped his feet once or twice on the gravel to shake out the kinks due to the cramped position, and put out a friendly hand.

"You're welcome," said Pete. "I'm the new man here. Barry's dead."

"So I have heard," answered the clergyman. "Some Nascaupees told me about it. How do you like this post? Think you'll get along all right?"

"I reckon so," answered Pete. "I'll be able to tell better next Spring after the fur begins to come in. Of course I'm anxious to make a good showing."

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The clergyman had really asked a personal question, but Pete had failed to understand this. To him getting along simply meant obtaining the approval of people like Mr. Smith.

"It is a lonely place," commented the parson.

"It would be," replied Pete. "But I'll tell you," he went on scratching his head in some embarrassment. "I was never so glad to see a man. The fact is—I'm thinkin' mighty hard about gettin' married. There's the girl, over there!"

Through curved hands he shouted.

"Come over here, Uapukun!"

The young woman came down, slowly. Usually she wore rather misshapen things of calico or other cheap goods. Some of them, doubtless, had passed on to her from Mrs. Barry. But now, for some reason, she had discarded them. Her short skirt was of buckskin, beautifully tanned and edged with fringe of the same material and finely beaded at the hem. Also she wore long moccasins and her glory of glossy black hair was no longer piled up on her head. The tresses hung down, far beneath her waist, and the fillet passing over her brow accentuated the shapeliness of her head. It was as if some strange pride had

made her abandon every vestige of the white woman's and present herself as just an Indian.

For a moment the missionary stared at her, by no means unmindful of her great beauty. To some extent, of course, the idea of such a wedding went against his grain though he was becoming accustomed, in that country, to some strange shufflings of matrimonial cards. Moreover, he kept in mind the fact that his excellent friend and bitter rival, Father Grandjean, of the Oblates, was quite likely to turn up very soon, and that if he did not officiate the other church stood an excellent chance of capturing the pair. North of the Grand Lac, as far as Hudson's Bay, the majority of the Indians were supposed to be Protestants. To the south they were generally Catholics. But here he found himself upon a sort of neutral ground, where the first man to come along was the one to gather the converts. He ascertained that Pete McLeod was a Presbyterian while Uapukun had dimly followed the ideas of the Barrys, who belonged to the other faith. Besides this, there were a few other things to be attended to, he learned,—one or two belated christenings and an Indian couple that had already raised a small fam-

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ily and were peacefully and philosophically awaiting the advent of some one entitled to make matters all right.

"Just a word or two first, my dear fellow," said the parson, sitting down on the prostrate trunk of an old birch.

Uapukun, discreetly, moved away to the edge of the lake. Little Ahtek came toddling down to her, and put a small hand in her own while, for a good many minutes, they gazed out quietly on the water while the two men were speaking. But the girl's dusky cheeks were more flushed than usual, and the hand held to her breast was seeking to still a loudly beating heart.

"There is just one thing I want to know," said the missionary, "because I won't have anything to do with a marriage that is not the most serious and the greatest thing in a man's life, if I can help it. Is it your intention to stick to that girl all your days? Do you truly love her?"

Pete looked at him with eyes that spoke of sterling honesty, of faith in himself and the girl.

"She worked over me when I was just a dying and rotting piece of manhood," he said, with a slight catch in his voice. "She tended to me like

a mother, and faithful as a dog. Them arms of hers lifted me off the bed, sir, just like I'd been a child, yes, me! I wasn't much but bones then, but there must have been some heft to me, just the same. It has come to me pretty quick, I reckon, but it's come, that feelin' that she can make me happy, that idea that this lonesome place'd be hell without her, beggin' your pardon, an' if you want to know the truth I'd rather ye'd take and chop off both my hands this minute than to think I'd ever make her unhappy!"

The words were spoken slowly, by a man who had known so much loneliness in the silent places of the vast North that he had often been compelled to speak aloud to himself, for the mere comfort of the sound. In his voice something vibrated that was like the power of truth itself, whereupon the missionary put a hand on his shoulder.

"It is well. Come," he said, quietly rising from his seat. Then he directed his steps to the place where Uapukun was waiting.

"This man tells me he wants to be your husband," he told her. "Is it also your wish?"

Her hand was still pressed to her bosom, but

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her eyes did not fall to the ground. She looked straight at the man who was questioning her, and her other arm swept a great arc of the lake and the islands.

"It is my hope!" she said. "It is more than all the world to me!"

Then all the men and women left at the Post, with their silent young crowding behind, began to troop into the store-house, since it was the biggest room. Its shelves were decorated with an assortment of the commoner groceries, while from the ceiling hung collections of shoe-packs, snow-shoes, tinware and great hanks of twine for the making of nets. The assemblage of Indians looked on respectfully. They had guessed and were glad that the big man was taking a mate from among them. He was well liked. It would keep him long on Grand Lac.

The men stood in front, in their best clothes, and the women behind, most of their shawls or blankets ornamented in the back by the protruding head of a peaceful brown infant. The preliminaries included the chasing out of a couple of hungry dogs that had sneaked in with the crowd, and in a few minutes it was all over.

Pete gave a feast, the expense of which he carefully noted down, that it might be deducted from his salary. A few hours later every soul at the Post was on the shore, watching the canoe as it disappeared behind the point, for the missionary was traveling fast. Standing close to Uapukun, Pete looked over the great lake. For the first time its immensity appeared to strike him as something astonishing. The far islands opposite could be seen, clearly enough, but toward the north the waters extended hazily, covering that which seemed to be a world without end. In the west the sun was beginning to go down in a gorgeous riot of color. At their feet the child Ahtech played with colored pebbles, stuffing his mouth with some of them, and to him, undoubtedly, the matter was just as important as the greater concerns of life appear in the real drama of existence.

Finally men began to seek their tents again. Women hurried off to kindle the fires for supper, and small boys sought their bows and arrows for a renewal of their play. At this time the two turned back towards the Post. The door soon closed upon them and, after the surprising fashion of white men, Pete placed his hand gently on the

back of Uapukun's head and brought her face to his lips. Her two hands, lifted to his shoulders, gripped them with convulsive strength.

"Oh! Peter! My husband!" she said.

But in her tender voice, in the look of her deep dark eyes, there was something that gave him the impression of love profound as the great blue lake, high as the mountains that guarded it, vast as the wondrous great land over which her ancestors had lorded for years and years without number. And never, in the years to come, was it to falter or lose an atom of its strength.

Then Uapukun went into the back room, that was also the kitchen, and stirred some embers, adding curling bark and chips till the fire crackled merrily. She prepared food while her voice found a song that was perhaps low and plaintive, as are all songs of wild people, yet possessed of some of the sweetness known to the feathered things that mate in the deep woods. A short time sufficed for the preparations and she brought in the food. But as it was becoming dark she lit the lamp. Then, suddenly, to the man, the whole world seemed illumined with a kindly light, and he was glad.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE GROWING OF AHTECK

SUCH was the beginning of a happy life for Pete McLeod, of which little can be recorded, since the bliss of pure love and quiet contentment can only be written in the throbbing breasts of men and women. Nowhere could he have found greater affection or an existence able to appeal more strongly to him. Several years elapsed before he was compelled to return to civilization. On the day he left Uapukun saw him depart with eyes that were dry, yet when, at the turning of the point, she saw the last wave of her husband's hand, she wept bitterly. To some old women who croaked of white men leaving and never returning she showed a face full of pride and faith, and went back to the log-house to lavish care upon the two children she had borne her man.

In Quebec his utmost ambition was realized. He saw Mr. Smith again, who did not reward him with the brief sentence he had hoped for, but with many friendly words and a hand-grasp that

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was an honor greater than the award of an order of merit.

As soon as possible, however, he hastened back and took up his life again as if there had been no interruption. The great love of his Indian wife proved entirely sufficient for his happiness. Under his efficient care the Post was doing splendidly and years came and went smoothly, during which his little boy and girl thrived apace, while the lad Ahtech began to give promise of great stature and strength against the time when full maturity should reach him.

The latter was a quaint, serious boy, his nature a marked contrast to that of the two little half-breeds, whom he loved and cared for with great gentleness. They constantly filled the Post with the noise of their laughter and shed tears quickly dried, playing and tearing their clothes unceasingly. The Indians who gathered in the summer positively worshiped them. Big grave men told them wonderful tales, made them bows and arrows, strung small snowshoes, fashioned toy canoes of birch-bark and a wealth of other playthings. But Ahtech constituted himself their watch-dog, keeping them from any harm, fetch-

ing and carrying for them at all times. Pete had begun to give them elementary lessons and Ahteck, admitted to these, learned something of reading and writing.

For some time Pete's old wound had given him slight trouble, of which he thought little, but which occasionally made the help of a stick welcome.

Came a day when Ahteck was sixteen, and he was already wonderfully strong and taller than most men of his race. Under Pete's tuition he had become an unusually good shot, a trapper of sorts, and was acquainted with a large extent of the surrounding country. Whether with the paddle, or the iron-shod pole used in surmounting rapids, he was a fine canoe-man, while over long portages he easily carried loads that entitled him to the respect of men mighty with the tump-line that fastens against the forehead and bears the burden resting on the back and loins. Here it may be noted that, in the Hudson's Bay country, one test of a good *voyageur* is the ability to carry over a goodly distance a pack made up of three bales of fur, and that these average ninety pounds apiece.

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Around the Post he was to Pete like another right hand, cheerfully doing more than a man's share, and the agent never treated him otherwise than as a son.

It was then that the terrible winter came, that is still spoken of in awed tones during reminiscences before the camp-fires.

It was a year of no *uapush*, for an epidemic had killed off the hares. There were some among the Montagnais and the Nascaupees, who had never been baptized, who said that the evil god, *Matshi Manitou*, had finally prevailed in his unending war against *Tshishe Manitou*, the god who is good, and that the Windegos, the bad spirits, had been let loose upon the world. Some returned to the Post starving, and had to be fed. An accident to a brigade accounted for some shortage there, but it is well known that entire families, even much farther south, perished in the wilderness, and that many never returned to Pointe Bleue.

One day, before Christmas, Pete told Ahleck that they would go hunting for fresh meat, four days' journey away, for big game was rare near the Post. They packed food upon a hand-sleigh,

and their small tent, and departed in a cold of fifty below zero during which whirling particles of snow stung like a sand-blast against the cracking and blackened skin of their faces. They reached a small river coming down from the big hills to the eastward that are as barriers erected against the wilds of the Labrador land, and traveled far up its banks, hoping for caribou. Finally they stopped on the fourth day, and made a cache of their provisions, taking enough to last them for a couple of days. They found but few tracks, the double round mark of cloven hoofs on solid footing, or the quadruple ones seen in softer snow, where the big dew-claws spread out and hold the animal up in places where others would flounder about to their deaths.

But the two days of searching proved barren. Ahtek chanced to kill a lean fox that gave them food enough for two more days, during which they persisted until hunger drove them back to their cache. Their stuff had been hidden in the crotch of a tree, but in their absence a high wind had arisen and blown a large spruce down, one of whose branches had pulled the bundle to the ground. There a wolverine had found it, torn

## THE GROWING OF AHTECK 53

everything open and devoured the food. The two looked at one another, in silence, knowing they were nearly a hundred miles from home, and ravenously hungry.

Pete, since early morning, had without a word borne a severe pain in his leg. The passing years had made him somewhat thinner and the toil of a hard life had aged him, for he had undergone much hardship for many years before he married. The sun was setting, and important though it was to return at once to the Post and its store of food, the man was compelled to sit down, looking in deep concern at the lad who was picking a few scattered tea-leaves from the snow. They were obliged to stop there that night, but in the morning, before the last stars had left the sky, they made a start, leaving behind them the hand-sleigh since there was no meat to haul back. Ahteck insisted upon taking all that was left in his pack, and as the blankets and tent, with the few cooking things, made but a moderate load, Pete consented, admiring his pluck.

They had gone but a short distance when those pains returned, badly, and were made worse by the *mal des raquettes*, that tore at the man's

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sinews like a ravening beast crunching his quivering flesh. Yet he kept on, and the torture he underwent could only be guessed at by Ahteck, for Pete never complained. On that day the lad killed a spruce-partridge and they ate it, a few mouthfuls apiece. When they stopped for the night the weather had moderated a little, and a heavy snow began to come down in thick flakes. The pain did not leave, and Pete spent a harassing night of wakefulness and anxiety, while the boy slept soundly at his side.

In the morning they found a foot of loose snow lying above the caked frost of former falls, and the cold was again biting shrewdly, but they started again with fierce pain in their stomachs, the man bearing the added anguish of his bad leg. He kept it up at a fair speed, for many long hours, but suddenly fell and was unable to rise again until Ahteck pulled him up. Then Pete sought the lad's eyes, that were looking very grave.

"I fear I shall not walk much farther," he said, "because now I am beginning to stumble on account of weakness. Thou shalt leave me now and hasten back, for I would hinder thee greatly. I may be able to follow a little in thy trail, and per-

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haps thou can'st return to me with help, in a few days. When I can no longer crawl on I will blaze a tree, so that thou mayest find me when coming back with men. I have learned that I am not as strong as in former days. Give my love to the two little ones, and my dearest love to Uapukun, their mother, whom it breaks my heart to think I may never see again."

"Yes," said Ahtech. "Death would come to thee before I could be here again."

"I have no fear of it. Sleep comes easily to the hungry whose strength has gone."

But Ahtech looked at him, shaking his head.

"I have become a man as big as thou," he said.

"Yes, soon to be bigger," answered Pete.

"Being a man I will not take thy order in this matter!" exclaimed Ahtech. "I will now obey my own will and stay with thee to the end!"

Pete begged, and prayed, and even threatened, but the lad refused to listen. He built two big fires between which they lay down and rested for an hour. At this time the pain left Pete's leg, but he felt as weak as ever and decided that when a man ceases to suffer it is a sign that death is not far away.

"Thou art unable to travel farther?" suddenly asked Ahteck.

"I think this is the place of my last camp," Pete told him, quietly. "It is a good one, for there is a great ledge of rocks that gives shelter from the wind, and there are hollow places where I may sleep. Also it will be easy for thee to find again."

Ahteck made no answer, for he had taken Pete's snowshoes and was cutting out all the *babiche* with which they had been strung, and boiled it in the little kettle, for a long time, and the two drank the hot water and swallowed the tough bits of thin hide, chewing them hard. Then they had some sleep.

In the morning Pete awoke the boy, telling him that the day was coming and that it was time for him to rise and be gone, insisting again that he should leave. But Ahteck, obstinately, refused to speak and lighted a fire. After this he took his gun and left without looking back, and Pete thought it was perhaps better so. He had heard the cry of a raven and deemed it a sign that he would die soon, but a few moments later he heard

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the gun's report and Ahteck returned with the large black bird.

Pete, at first, refused to touch any of it, knowing it could help little in sustaining his life for another day, but Ahteck sternly threatened to lie down with him and die also unless he took his share, so finally they ate up the coarse hard meat together.

As soon as they had finished Ahteck took his tump-line.

"If I am strong enough yet to lift thee from the ground we will go on," he declared.

Paying no more heed to Pete's refusals than if they had been the babbling of a child he knelt down and pulled the man on his back. He had placed the strap of his tump-line on his brow and fastened the long ends under Pete's thighs. The boy's long legs shook badly at the great lift, but after he had managed to straighten himself up he started, going faster than when Pete had limped at his side.

Till the middle of the day he walked on, never resting on account of the fear that he should not be able to lift his load on his back again. By this

time the breath was coming from his chest like that of a moose gasping with a bullet through the lungs.

"For the dear love of God!" moaned Pete. "Stop now, Ahteck. Here is a tree with big roots. Drop me between these two that I may rest in peace and then go on with the Lord's blessing and mine."

But Ahteck refused and kept on going until his foot struck a stone hidden in the soft snow and he fell with that great weight on his back. For a moment he was stunned and Pete, owing to the weakness that had come to him, felt some gladness that they were to die quietly together. But so wonderfully was the life of the big lad clenched within him that he was soon gasping again and wiping away the blood that ran into one eye from a cut on his brow. A few minutes later he was quietly building a fire and they drank hot water from melted icicles.

Pete had begun to long to be left in peace, but Ahteck's strong white teeth came together and he looked like Maigan, the wolf, who snarls in a trap in the very face of death. He found strength

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again to lift Pete to his back and went on while great trees were bursting with the frost, cracking like guns, and the ice on the little river to one side groaned with the struggle of the imprisoned flood. For two more hours he kept this up until they came to the fresh tracks of a moose, and Ahtech sank down again, nearly but not quite exhausted.

"It was made in the early morning, Peter," he said, panting. "I cannot follow it, for—for thou would'st probably be dead before I could get back. But I will look a little farther."

He pulled his gun out of the woollen cover and disappeared following the trail, and a minute later Ahtech returned, smiling, with a fair-sized hare in his hand.

"Here is life for one more day," he said. "Now I shall be able to follow the moose. I shall need strength for that, so I will eat more than thou, this time."

Ahtech ate the greater part of the hare, though Pete had a fair portion, full as much as his enfeebled stomach was able to bear.

"Now here is the skin," said Ahtech, "and the insides and the bones. If I do not return soon

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boil them and eat them, for it will mean more life for thee. I think that God is stretching His hand out in help to us. I go now."

Then, for many hours, the man slept, and dreams came to him in which the beloved woman's face was near his own and the little children played about him. The night came and he slept on and on, under the blankets, and finally the morning sun rose in a sky that was clear and bright in the intense cold. Hunger had returned and he looked at the rabbit skin, but shook his head.

"No, I must not touch it," he said. "It is not likely that Ahtech will kill the moose, which has probably gone far. When the lad returns this will help him to get home. It is but one good day's travel now."

But a couple of hours later he heard a shout and Ahtech appeared, carrying a great load of meat.

"I came up to him yesterday as the sun was setting," the lad explained. "My hands were shaking badly and my knees were beginning to knock together, but I took a long breath and the first shot killed him. It was a far shot."

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"Ah-teck! Thou art a man, and the mother who bore thee would have been proud of thee," said the agent.

And so after this they boiled the good meat, which put much strength into them, after which Pete, leaning upon the boy's shoulder, followed him on the way to the Post, traveling but slowly so that they only reached it on the evening of the next day.

Like a log the lad slept the round of the clock, and when he awoke the woman Uapukun sobbed on his shoulder in thankfulness, and clung to him because he had saved the man she loved, until Ah-teck blushed and went out to get two men with a hand-sleigh to go with him and bring back the rest of the meat from the big bull.

It took a good many days before Pete was himself again, and the weeks were long during which he awaited the first indications of Spring which returned slowly, with the waters of rivers beginning to burst through their heavy covering and the days getting longer. But at last the poplars and the birches showed the glory of tender green leaves and the grasses that had been dead came to life, and triangular flocks of geese sailed high above

the great lake, seeking farther nesting grounds in the salt waters of the Hudson's Bay.

At this time, a few weeks after the heavy ice had finally disappeared from Grand Lac, the real drama of Ahteck's existence began, coming like a clap of thunder from a clear sky, changing the whole tenor of his life, altering the workings of a mind that was simple and yet full of imagination, and sending him out of a world in which he had lived so happily, in constant peace, into another of fierce struggles against powers that held him in their grasp like an animal seized by the cruel jaws of a trap, or a great fish whose gills are caught within the meshes of a net.

## CHAPTER V

### THE BLOW THAT CHANGED A LIFE

ONE day in the early Summer Pete left for a trip to the northward that might last a week, and a few hours after his departure a little fleet of four canoes arrived at the Post, with seven men, four women and the usual scattering of babies and older children, besides a few dogs. They were Nascauees from the regions east of the big lake, and strangers. None of them spoke a word of English or French but their tongue was readily understood by the Montagnais and every one could speak with them. The woman Uapukun happened to be busy in the store, with the two children playing near at hand when, led by an exceedingly tall and powerful man, these strangers filed in.

A few of them at once crouched on the floor, smoking silently, while others occupied a couple of the rough benches that stood around the big stove. Then the tall man began to glare at Uapu-

kun, his eyes staring very wide, and he continued to look at her persistently.

Ahteck happened to see her take a very deep breath, while her hand, for an instant, rested upon her bosom. After this she went hurriedly out of the store-room and the lad soon followed her to her room, in deep concern, asking if she were ill. But Uapukun shook her head and gently made a sign that he might leave. He noticed that her hand was shaking as she lifted it, and returned to the store, sorely puzzled.

Since Pete was away Ahteck was soon busily engaged in trading with the newcomers. From their packs they had pulled out good pelts of fox and lynx, some fine bundles of marten and mink, a few skins of wolverine and wolf, and prime otters. These were all laid upon the boards that served as a counter and Ahteck counted the pelts, examined each one carefully, sorting them according to grade, and began to listen to the Indians' demands.

The lad was quite aware that they must have been in the habit of trading at some other distant post, and that for reasons of their own they were now trying to sell their fur here, having decided

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to change their place of barter. It was quite possible that, as sometimes happens, they had elsewhere obtained a good debt and were now doing this to avoid settling up. Also, of course, for reasons good or altogether futile, they might have become angry at some other agent or factor and ceased to deal with him. But there was no means of discovering the exact truth, and the lad knew better than to question them. The fur was there before him, and of prime quality, so that it must be bought if possible.

After listening placidly for a long time, Ah-teck began to count on his fingers before them, very slowly, making his offers. He would give so many *nipagan* (blankets), and so much *pok* (gunpowder). They might also have of *nipish* (tea) and *kokush* (pork), so many pounds. Yes, he had *tshishtemau* (tobacco) that was very good and black and strong, and if they wanted *kajioash* (sugar) they could have some. Moreover there was the flour, which was the most important item, so many bags of full weight, and clothing, which included bright shawls for the women. He also showed them fish-hooks and netting twine, tea-kettles and cooking pots.

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The haggling lasted all of two days, being conducted on both sides with inexhaustible patience. A number of times the men took up their fur, in silence, and trooped out of the store, with chins lifted high in air, asking whether they were children to submit to such unfair terms. As often Ahtech waved them grandly away, declaring that he had offered far more than all the peltry was worth, because they were good hunters and fine men, and he wanted them to bring their catch to Grand Lac in other years. Then they would return, one at a time, looking at the floor as if they had lost something, and slowly discuss the weather and the prospect of an abundance of hares for the next winter. Gradually, the important matters would be resumed, by the men, while the women crouching behind them occasionally whispered important suggestions, nursed their babies and chased the dogs out. With Indians these lengthy discussions are among the greater joys of life, not to be frittered away in a few fleeting moments. A man accepted a pipeful of tobacco and made a wry face, as if questioning its quality. Ahtech retaliated by holding up an otter-skin with a damaging bullet hole and throwing it contemp-

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tuously back on the counter. At last Ahtech gave up a great deal more than he had first proposed, and the Nascaupees accepted much less than they had originally insisted upon. There is not the slightest doubt that each side considered that it had achieved a signal victory. The women took away great packs of goods and piled them up inside their tents while the men smoked innumerable pipes of the now abundant tobacco and, without the slightest inconvenience, drank enough tea to kill a white man.

On the third day one of the older Nascaupee children stood a long time in front of the store and, finally seeing Uapukun alone, went up to her and delivered a message it had been carefully instructed to repeat. The woman, whose face had become much worn in a few days, bent her head in assent.

Late that afternoon Ahtech, with his gun on his shoulder, was returning from a place where, a few miles away, he had been looking for some canoe-bark, without finding just what he wanted. It was beginning to get dark when he reached a trail leading to the Post, and he heard two people speaking angrily.

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Stopping under the shadow of thick bushes he saw that Uapukun was one of them.

"Yes!" she was crying. "For years I thought I would be in safety here! It is so far away! Yes, at one time I was willing to be thy dog, to work for thee. I belonged to thee. The blankets had been paid for me, and the gun. I was like any other woman until thy blows became too hard to bear. But when one of them struck down the baby in my arms I became like the she-wolf that hides her whelps in fear of the male. I wept that I was not strong enough to kill thee! But I could steal a canoe and go, when thou wert gone. I journeyed far and starved until my breasts were dry and the child wept for hunger. But I reached this place and thou didst not find me until now. So now thou mayest lift thy arm and kill me!"

"Kill thee!" snarled the tall Nascaupee. "How may that help me? Listen—I want a new gun—a gun that shoots many times, and cartridges for it in plenty. Of tobacco I want twenty pounds, and tea, many packages. Get me these things while I wait here. Next year I shall come for more, because the trading here is good."

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"I will not," cried the woman. "Those things belong to the chief man here!"

"Then I will wait until that man comes home. He will have to give me those things for thee, for thou art my woman. I will tell him that the boy is thy son and also mine. Perhaps he will pay well for thee, many blankets and a gun—a very good gun. Perhaps he will lift his hand and strike thee, and tell thee to go away and follow me. I will wait and see!"

"Before he comes back I will kill myself!" she said, in a voice that had grown cold as the blade of a knife.

Fierce anger moved the man. One of his great hands went forth and caught Uapukun by the throat. The other drew back to strike her.

But then something swished through the air and, before the man's fierce blow could fall, the butt of Ahtech's gun came down upon the great Nascaupee's head and, without a sound, like an ox that is struck by the pole-ax, his knees sank under him and he fell forward on his face.

The lad's instinct had compelled him to protect the woman he now knew to be his mother. More than ever before his heart had gone out to her.

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He grasped her hand and they ran together towards the Post buildings, hardly realizing the calamity that had come upon them. When they reached the dwelling they sat for a long time in the darkness, for the children had already been put to bed and everything was silent. Nothing disturbed them but the dreadful thoughts that were gradually entering their minds and gnawing at their hearts. Finally they became crushed as they thought of their offense against God and man.

After a long time Uapukun spoke, with lips quivering and her voice coming hoarsely.

"I loved the man Peter," she said, in a low voice. "From other men I had known only blows and cruel words. He put his hand out to me in love, with words soft as the honey we take from the hollowed trees. Three long years had gone by, years during which the great fear had left my heart. I thought I never would be found. I—I loved—"

"Yes," said the lad. "I understand, and to Pete thou hast been a good and loving woman, and to me a mother, though I knew it not."

Another long silence ensued. Ahteck's elbow

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was resting on the table of planks made in the saw-pit; his square jaw was in the hollow of his hand. He stared fixedly, far away, through the walls of massive logs, through the darkness of the night, as if his vision had known no obstacles. But that which he saw was appalling. At last he turned again to his mother.

"Now I must surely have killed my father," he said, very slowly, the soft inflexions of the Indian tongue dropping from his lips like distilled bitterness. "I have never heard of such a deed. It is said that in the old times, very long ago, when the great hungers came on them, our people sometimes left the old to die. But never did they kill them. And we know also that killing is an accursed thing, for all the priests of the white men tell us so. One of them, the Father of the great white beard, told me of the death of one man Abel, who was killed by his brother Cain. And upon Cain fell the greatest curse that was ever known. But a father is more than a brother, and therefore a curse will be upon me such as never happened before, more great and terrible than all other curses. Surely it will fall upon me and on all those I love; upon Peter and the little chil-

dren; upon thee, my mother! But if I go far away it might be that the curse would fall upon me alone, and I must make ready to go away now. If the other Nascaupees seek me, to kill me in revenge, they may find me, and it will be better that this should happen far away from here. In my heart there is no regret that I defended thee, and I would do this thing again. Yet it is very sure I cannot escape this curse."

Then the mother wept bitterly and threw herself at the feet of her tall young son, begging that he might forgive her, but he lifted her up and, in his great strength, he was like a man lifting a child that sorrows. Then he put his arms about her as if to shield her from other perils.

"Do not cry, O my mother!" he said, "for I shall always love thee with a very great love. I think that men can never know the real reason of things, but surely they happen and bring great curses because the world about us is filled with the powers of evil. The bear that goes in the trap is caught by the man, and the man is caught by the devil."

The poor woman crushed him to her bosom, weeping. Theirs was a crude theology, blended

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of an inheritance of somber savage myths with ideas gathered from the priests and the clergymen, who always spoke much of the devil and of hell.

They sat thus for the greater part of the night, obsessed by these thoughts, dumb with the great horror of it all. It was as if some cataclysm had suddenly crushed away all happiness, leaving behind it nothing but wreckage. A fine drizzling rain was falling, slowly, so that no speck of light came in from the windows, and they were in the darkness of the bottomless pit. A lamp stood near, on the table, but they never thought to light it. But at last the day began to return, and, a short distance away, they heard men speaking, excitedly, though they could catch but the murmur of subdued voices. The woman listened, in an agony of fear, but Ahtech was utterly calm, with merely the intent look upon his face of a man who stands up in his canoe, overlooking a rapid and studying the best way through boiling waves and between cruel boulders.

The sun rose again, for the misty rain had cleared off. Suddenly came a discordant note. It was but the laughter of the two children, awakened. Uapukun rose from her chair, pain-

fully, to attend to their wants. Ahtech was busily engaged in getting things ready for a long voyage. He ate, deliberately, forcing himself to do so that his strength might not suffer. Then he went out at the back of the house, drawn by an invincible force, to the scene of his terrible deed.

But when he reached the place there were tracks of many moccasins on the ground. He knew that they had been made by the newly arrived Nascaupees. But nowhere could he find any trace of the tall man he had smitten down!

He cautiously went off towards the beach. Among the many tents men and women were beginning to rise. A few of the latter were coming out to kindle their fires. A man stretched long arms in a yawn and dogs sniffed about the ground, in hopeless search for overlooked bones. But the tents of the Nascaupees were no longer there; their long high-bowed canoes, previously upturned on the beach, had disappeared. The only remaining trace of them was the smoldering embers from the cooking-fire they had built before their tents. Ahtech decided that they must have searched for the man who was missing and, finding the body, had carried it away with them. Somewhere in

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the wilderness, doubtless, they would dispose of it according to their savage rites.

In less than another hour Ahtech was ready. He had his gun in a new buckskin cover, with ammunition; also provisions to last three or four weeks and his blankets with some spare clothing. All these things he packed in his canoe and waited.

His mother came down and stood beside him. Her arms were hanging loosely at her sides and her head was bent down upon her breast.

"Yesterday," he said, "I was a man like all others. This day I am changed, as in the tales the old people tell the little children, in which men become wolverines and other beasts. But, oh, my mother, I feel that my heart is not at all changed, because I love thee more than ever before. The two little ones I love, and also Peter thy husband."

The children came running down to the beach, shouting.

"Thou art going away, Uncle Caribou!" they cried.

He sat down upon a rock, and took one of them on each of his knees.

"I am going upon a very long hunt," he answered.

"It must be a very long hunt, and far away," said the boy, "for the fur will not be good before a long time."

"A very long hunt in a far country," Ahteck repeated. "And I do not know whether I shall ever find that which I am hunting for."

"Is it a silver fox?" asked the little girl.

"Perhaps a silver fox," he answered.

Then he rose and drew his mother to one side.

"It will be well to tell thy man Peter about the killing," he said, "but nothing more, on account of these little children, and because of the love he has for thee. For on this day I feel that I have become a man and it is my command to thee, my mother. He would cling to thee because of that love, but all of the truth would be like a thorn in his flesh."

Ahteck, after this, kissed the little ones, in the white man's fashion, and gently pressed his mother's hand, for a moment. His canoe was lying against the sand of the beach, and he gently pushed the bow away into deeper water, with the blade of his paddle, after which he entered the

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frail thing. Finally he waved his hand in salute and left the heavy-hearted woman looking at him through her tears until he became but a speck, away towards the south.

Two days later Pete returned. As always happened he found his wife waiting for him at the water's edge. At once he saw that she was hollow-eyed, but the love of his heart concealed from him the fact that she was showing some evidences of age that had suddenly come upon her.

"Ahteck has gone away," she said dully. "There was a quarrel in the woods, behind the houses, with a Nascaupee that was here, and the man must have been slain. His people went away in haste, before sunrise, carrying the—the thing off with them, and Ahteck—"

Her arm was uplifted towards the south, for she was utterly unable to finish her words.

Her husband looked into the tear-stained eyes, much concerned, and the deep quiet love he had borne her all these years was in his voice as he put his big gentle hand upon her shoulder.

"The poor lad!" he exclaimed. "I wonder what that devil can have done to him, for Ahteck has always been the quietest fellow that ever

lived and we never saw anything but goodness in his heart. In that great body of his it beats like a woman's. I hope no evil comes to him, and that he will return soon. There was little need for him to run away, and I can't quite understand his doing it."

He walked off towards the Post, thoughtfully, and the woman followed. There was no law in that distant country, yet it was within the reach of the law, should it ever be put in motion. He realized that if Ahteck had remained he might have been compelled, according to his lights, to arrest the boy and keep him for months until far-away authorities could be notified and their orders carried out. He began to think it was just as well that the lad was gone, though he would miss him sorely. Since he had seen no murder, no body of a slain man, and no one had complained, he felt that he could hold his peace with an easy conscience.

Once within the building he kissed his wife tenderly and greeted the children as they swarmed up on his knees. After this, when he had eaten, he went back to the routine of his work.

Many months elapsed before one of the mis-

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sionary fathers stopped at the Post, in the course of an extended journey, bearing a short note written in pencil on a piece of yellow wrapping paper done up carefully in a roll of birch bark. It was written in Ahteck's clumsy, sprawling hand, and thus addressed:

**"To Marie Uapukun, the Woman  
of Peter McLeod,  
"At Grand Lac Mistassini.**

**"I am at Lac St. Jean. Until now I have  
worked in the sawmill. It is a great place of  
many houses. Soon I go trapping. This is to  
say that I have great love for thee and also Peter.  
Also the children.**

**"АНТЕК."**

## CHAPTER VI

### THE EXILE

AHTECK continued his journey south along the shore only for a few miles. Then, over a tremendous expanse of water, he turned to the westward, reaching the islands. There he hid himself, pulling the canoe ashore among the bushes. But at nightfall he started again, going south once more. His thorough knowledge of the vast lake permitted him to avoid the main line of travel, and in a few days he was lost in a network of small streams and lakes, until he felt absolutely safe from pursuit. It was not that he was afraid but the animal instinct was strong within him, of self preservation and of turning against any that might have sought to do him harm. His life was his own for the time being, even though a bitter thing to face, and as long as his strength remained in him he would fight for it and be dangerous.

But never, during the long journey, did he discover any sign that the Nascaupees were seek-

ing him. The chances, he carefully calculated, were that they would never follow him long. They had large, heavy canoes, and came from far away, knowing nothing about the great country to the south. A strong man, with a small and swift canoe lightly laden, journeying through a familiar wilderness, was utterly beyond their power to overtake. Moreover none of the others had seen the quarrel, and it was likely that they knew not who had struck the blow. He also felt quite safe in regard to the dear people left at the Post. So many friendly Montagnais were camped there that the Nascaupees would never dare to work any injury to them. The precautions he had taken, he realized, were scarcely needed, but he had no intention of running stupidly into danger.

The tall Nascaupee, he felt sure, had been killed, and therefore Uapukun would never be troubled by him again. He was not running away from men so much as fleeing from the vengeance of the skies. When the evil spirits finally had their will of him they would find him alone, with no loved ones about him to wreak further harm upon.

For a time he was practically lost in the wildernesses of the height of land, merely because he had reached a country unknown to him except by vague hearsay. But his sense of direction never left him, and his unerring instinct as to waterways made him perfectly confident. Over the great barren lonesome stretches of the higher land he kept on going, his Indian stolidity preventing his being dismayed in the awful solitude. The lad's soul was harrowed indeed, but this happened in the fairer stretches of marsh or forest, during sunlit days, just as strongly as when he toiled under downpours in the wastes that seemed unending.

Finally, one day, when the world had begun to look like a place wherein it was unbelievable that the foot of man had ever trodden, he shot many rapids down a small river and, at a turn of the current, suddenly found himself in an inlet leading to a great lake. He pushed along its shore, in a strong wind, always to the southward. But when he stopped in the middle of the day, for food, he was certain of the locality.

It surely was Lake Chigobiche, and his calculations had proved correct. Year after year he had

heard the *voyageurs* describing their journeys and the map of a vast country was in his head. During the afternoon he came to an island upon which were clear evidences of old burials. He had heard of it, and knew that it was a place to which travelers gave a wide berth. It was the last resting ground on earth of men of ancient and forgotten tribes, no one knew how far back, and the superstitions of the Indians had turned it into a place of bad omen, over which hovered spirits that brooked no intrusion. Ahteck had no fear of them, but kept on his way until, of a sudden, he smelled wood-smoke. It was nearly night when he came, for the first time in his long trip, across a camp of Indians who told him they were bound farther north.

They gave him accurate directions, wondering at a man traveling alone and puzzled because he had not taken the easy short way down the chief branch of the Ashuapmouchouan. One of them recognized him, however, having once been among the crew of a brigade to Grand Lac, and they concluded that he was looking over the land for some purpose of the great Company, whose ways are ever mysterious.

When he started in the morning it was along a well-marked road. The slightest indentations of the shores had been described to him, and after he left the big lake the portages bore the imprint of many feet that had traveled for years, and smaller clearings held raspberry plants, which grow only where man or fire has passed. At the heads of the carries he found trees that were blazed with the signs of the high roads, and places upon which generations of trappers had camped were marked by abandoned pegs, some rotting away after many years while others still bore fresh marks of the ax. Ahtech now made many miles a day, drifting fast along extensive waters that were still and black or feeling his craft rise and fall over the solid, ever recurring waves of rapids or shoot past jagged rocks or by the side of submerged boulders against which walls of green water split and rose, to fall again in a smother of suds.

And then, very suddenly, he entered a region that was different. He saw fields of potatoes and golden waves of wheat bowing before the wind, and places in the wilderness that were only half cleared as yet, and in which great charred stumps rose above crops of oats. For the first time in his

life he saw houses that were built of flat boards and recognized them, for Peter had often spoken of such things. But his greatest surprise was when he came in view of cows and horses that were pasturing on the rich herbage, unafraid of man. He had seen pictures of them, in a book that had been many years at the Post on Grand Lac, and remembered them well. Nevertheless they were very wonderful.

All this was the beginning of the Parish of St. Félicien, that was beginning to grow apace. He had to be very careful at the fierce rapids below, and was forced to portage many times. Again there was a long smooth stretch of dead water. Upon its banks, several times, he saw children who reminded him of the little ones he might never see again, and his heart grew heavy in his breast. Finally he reached the opening of the big river into Lake St. John, which is a shallow inland sea of over a hundred miles in circumference, studded with a few big islands and so wide in some places that the other shore may not be seen. The wind was blowing briskly here and he had to keep his canoe very near the shore. Later in the day he reached a wide point jutting

out upon the lake, upon which he saw many of the square Montagnais tents and a number of small houses. A church with a steeple stood upon the hillside, with a flowering garden about it, while lower down there was a building flying the Company's flag. The beach was very rough and stony, requiring careful landing, and many canoes had been carefully upturned upon it. He knew that he had reached the Pointe Bleue, and that it was the reservation upon which the men of his race were allowed to live. All the rest, as far as he could see, was in the hands of the whites. Farther along the shore he saw a house much larger than the others, from which clouds of gray smoke pulsed out in great jets, and above which a black chimney rose high in the air. It was some miles away but he knew it at once for a sawmill, for Indians had told him that such buildings were the monsters that fed upon the forests, that ate up the trunks of pines and spruces with a hunger that was never satisfied. The story was always the same. At first the white men came in a country, few at a time, and bought furs. Later on they always returned, in gradually increasing numbers, and dammed up lakes and streams, choking them

with logs, and every mill was like the paw of a great devouring beast placed upon the land and crushing the heritage of the red man.

The water was somewhat rough, and the landing was a ticklish matter. Ahtech carefully watched his chance, and as a wave bore him in he gave a great stroke of the paddle and, the moment before the canoe touched the shore, stepped out in water knee deep and lifting it up by a thwart, bore it safely ashore.

Several men had watched him, coming down to help him in case of need. They were Montagnais, just as swarthy as himself, but wore the clothing of white men.

"It was well done, stranger, and thou art welcome," said one of them to him. "By the look of thy canoe thou comest from a far place."

"Ay," he answered. "I come from afar. I have never been in a place like this, where so many people live. Where may a man pitch his tent?"

"There is food ready in my house," said a man whose name, he found later, was Jean Caron. "There is plenty of time for the setting up of thy tent, which may be done on the road-side. Turn

thy canoe over and take up thy things. I will help thee carry them, if needed."

But there was little, for the food had been nearly all used, and the lad took up his pack and gun and followed the man to his house. He did this very naturally, and not like one accepting a gift offered in charity, for in the Grand Nord, when a hungry man comes to a place where men are camped, a portion of the food on hand is his by the right of custom descended from days im-memorial.

In Jean Caron's house the woman set before him fish, and bread and strong tea, and a little girl stared at him. Children, for some reason, were naturally attracted by him. She came near, as he finished his food, and he put out his hands to her.

"In the place I have left," he said, "there is a small boy and also a little girl, whom I love greatly. They come and sit upon my knees and I tell them tales of why the bees sting and how the beaver got his flat tail."

She came to him, a pretty child of some ten years, a little bashful, perhaps, yet also mightily desirous of hearing the ancient tales she already

knew, but which find new enchantment with every repetition.

"Thou art so very tall," she said, "and a very strong man."

He laughed, and as she came near he lifted her up to his knee, while the parents smiled, and told her how Misheshu, the fox, had fooled the four blind men and been well punished for his bad conduct.

Finally the little girl went off to help her mother, a thin woman showing evidence of much hard toil, and Jean Caron questioned his guest, asking if he intended to return soon to the north country.

"I will remain here," said Ahteck. "Here I must make my home now and find some way to earn bread."

Jean Caron shook his head. The Indians, except for occasional jobs of guiding, were little used to do any work in Summer. Those who had small fields in the reservation cultivated them. Also they made new canoes, while waiting for the blessed cold days to return, when they could go back to trapping.

"A big strong lad such as thyself could get

work to do in the saw-mill," he said, "but the men of our race are not fond of such toil. Dost thou speak French?"

"Yes, and some English also," answered Ahteck.

"They might take thee, but one has to begin when a whistle blows, and keep on till it blows again, and men order one about, and there is little time to rest."

"I will do it," replied Ahteck, quietly.

He pitched his small tent by the roadside, and in the morning, very early, walked off to the mill. A foreman looked at him, in surprise, and questioned him. The lad knew nothing of the work but his apparent willingness, his frank face, and the capable strong limbs he showed, spoke well for him. He was handy with simple tools, having for some years done all of the little carpentering needed at the Post, under Pete's direction. In a few days he was proving worth his small wage. In a month he was a first-rate workman.

But this life, to one used to the freedom of the wilderness, to the greatness of the country in which a thousand square miles often hold not a single man, although he bore it bravely, was a

trial to him. He saved his wages, very carefully, and one day, after three months, he received a long letter from his mother, enclosing a paper he was directed to present to the agent at the Pointe Bleue Post of the Company. Pete McLeod had gone deep in his pocket and was sending him an order for two hundred dollars.

On the next day, in Caron's house, he found a young man called Paul Barotte, but better known among the Indians as Nikutshash, the squirrel. Paul's old mother possessed a hunting ground in a territory above the second Lake Aleck, which is also known as the second Lac des Grandes Pointes. They had owned a horse and a small house on the reservation. But the house had burned down in the early spring and the horse had died, so that they were in a bad fix, as he had earned money in carting lumber. He could not work the trapping lines alone, and was anxious to find a companion to go on shares with him. This, naturally, required some money, that Paul's mother and sister might be kept alive during the winter, and to buy supplies, though the agent would allow some debt.

Ahteck at once seized this opportunity, for Jean

Caron, who had been a good friend, and with whom he boarded, so advised him.

"My own hunting ground is two days' journey this side of Paul's," he said. "I know his country. There is good fur. It is a hard country, over many hills and rough ground. But two strong young men can do well there."

The man coughed hard, having a bad cold in his chest, and went on to tell more about that region. The upshot of it all was that a good part of Ahteck's money was left with Paul's mother. The remainder was spent for new traps, ammunition and food, and, when they finally left, it was with but a small debt at the Post.

"You can have more," said the agent, sizing up the two men.

"This will do," replied Ahteck, quietly.

Before leaving, however, he went up to the house of the Oblate fathers. Nearly all the Indians who used Pointe Bleue were fervent Catholics. He had found himself in an atmosphere of much religion. The Fathers themselves lived entirely on the contributions of the Indians and maintained their church upon them also. Ahteck constantly heard of the forgiveness of sins.

All one had to do was to show thorough repentance and hatred of one's evil doings. Then the priest would inflict some penance, that must be cheerfully borne, and give absolution of the sins.

He rang the door-bell but there was no answer. Walking in he saw no one, but in the garden he had noticed one of the Fathers, an old white-bearded man clad in a torn blue jumper, wearing high moccasins, who was toiling among the cabbages. Ahteck went up to him, expressing his desire to confess his sins. The old man looked at him kindly, placed the handle of his hoe against the fence, and led him back to the house.

"Is it true," asked Ahteck, "that the confessions of men remain in the hearts of the priest, to be on no account repeated to others?"

"It is true, my son. But art thou a Catholic? If so I have not seen thee in the church."

"I have not been there, for the weight that is on me kept me from it," answered Ahteck. "When I was a very small child, my mother tells me, I was baptized at Grand Lac by one of the priests who came from this house. His name was Father Laroux."

"That is my name. I was there sixteen years

ago," said the old man. "I baptized many children there. Begin thy tale."

Slowly at first, and then faster, the words came to Ahteck who, with outward calm but a fast beating heart, told of the coming of the Nascaupes and the awful thing that followed, while the good old man listened, open-mouthed, at the terrible tale unfolded to him.

Finally he placed his hand on the big lad's shoulder.

"It was done in sudden fear for the life of thy mother," he said, "I understand. But why did'st thou leave so suddenly?"

"I feared the vengeance of God," replied Ahteck. "I wanted it to fall upon me alone, far from those I loved, so that they might not suffer for my sin."

The old man hesitated. He knew the Indian character and its strong belief in the powers of evil, and could understand. To the simple-minded man before him he dared not say too much. It was possible that this separation from loved ones was one of the means whereby penance was being inflicted by divine wisdom, to the ultimate redemption of a soul.

"The matter is a very grave one, my son," he finally said. "'Thou shalt not kill!' says the Lord. It is possible that some uncovenanted mercies of His infinite goodness may finally keep thy body from harm and thy soul from perdition. I cannot give thee plenary absolution now, but I can pray for thee and bid thee go forth with courage. Much repentance of thy terrible deed, and much prayer for forgiveness, must henceforth come from thee, and it is my hope to be able soon, after thou shalt have shown the earnestness of thy repentance, to lift thy load of sorrow from thy big shoulders. Go now, and may peace abide with thee."

The big lad staggered out. It was good to know that there was a possibility of hope. Yet he had not obtained full forgiveness. The weight was still on his shoulders. Little by little his mind became somber again at the thought of how little could avail the groping efforts of one soul against all the powers of darkness. Even the priests acknowledged that God claimed vengeance for His own. The killing of a father was so terrible a deed that the vengeance must surely come.

He placed many candles before the altar of the

little church and went back, silently, very busy with the preparations for departure. The others were not surprised by his gloomy looks. They had always known him as a very serious youth, little inclined to talk, given to long periods of somber thought. Only with Caron's little girl he became cheerful, at times, and the child had become very fond of him. In the afternoons, after she returned from the school where a host of dusky little ones repeated letters in chorus and learnt the mysteries of simple addition, she waited his return from the mill, eager to talk with him and share some of the wonderful things she had learnt.

Caron, in early September, started off with his family to the place of his wintering. The two young men accompanied them as far as their permanent camp, and remained for one day to help them out a little with the provision of wood. Then Ahtech and Paul left them and plunged farther into the wilderness.

## CHAPTER VII

### **UAPUKUN JOINS HER SON**

AHTECK with his friend Paul Barotte worked as only men of their race can, when the time of hunting is at hand. The Indian of the North, lazy-looking during the rest of summer, often toils so hard at his trapping that it is a wonder that flesh and blood are able to answer the demands made upon them. They extended their line farther, in unoccupied country, working from a permanent camp which they built of logs. Here they would meet after long journeys during which they both worked different parts of the line, and when Christmas came they interrupted their toil for a few days, during which they went off to spend the great day with Jean Caron and his family.

They returned on the next day to their traps, and when, after long months, the ice finally went out, they went back to Lac St. John with a fine lot of fur with which they paid the debt at the

Post, leaving a goodly sum to their credit, which they placed in the savings bank at Chicoutimi, the head of navigation of the Saguenay, below the Grand Discharge. During the following summer they were by no means idle. Paul, helped by his friend, built a small new house. Also they worked at the mill and had one good job of guiding.

The following winter paid them well also. They had started off without any debt, and prices for mink, of which they had caught many, chanced to be high. The little accounts at the bank were increased. Ahtech still boarded at Caron's and the friendly child, Mititesh, who was growing fast, still watched eagerly for his return from work.

But while Ahtech toiled at these things another great change in his life was impending. It was rumored that the agent at Pointe Bleue was to obtain a better place elsewhere, and men of the brigade from Grand Lac hinted that Peter McLeod had spoken of a possibility of his returning nearer to civilization, that his children might obtain a better education.

Away north at Grand Lac, however, the great

loving heart of Pete McLeod had begun to beat more feebly. In the winter there had been a frightful blizzard in which he was caught, for a time, and from which he issued with feet badly frozen and a cough that racked his frame. Again, soon after the melting of the ice he had much to do with the saving of some Indians, in a sudden storm, who had been upset while lifting their nets. Few details were ever heard of his sickness, excepting that towards the last he had grown very thin, and the great chest uplifted fast in shallow breaths, while his face had become narrower and the eyes very large. The brigade arrived and brought him an important letter. We know not whether it was Mr. Smith who wrote it, but the words brought to Pete a look of happy pride, as if the hopes and ambitions of a long, honest and manly life of faithful endeavor had all been fulfilled. His breathing became quieter and a look of great peace came upon him, while the new arrivals stood outside, shaking their heads in deep concern. He fell asleep, quietly, like a child.

But a few days later he pressed the woman dear to his heart to his bosom, and passed his

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thin hands over the children's heads and kissed them, lovingly. To the weeping woman he said that for years she had made him the happiest man on earth, and that he was grateful. After this he went to sleep again, very quietly. But this time he did not awaken again, having passed away in the achievement of hope, in the contentment of duty well done.

For many long hours the woman prayed, as best she knew how. When she rose from the side of his bed it could be seen that there were a good many white hairs among her still heavy black tresses, and that the face that had been so smooth and beautiful was seamed with many lines of sorrow and care.

A new man had come with the brigade, to take Peter's place at Grand Lac, for the letter had brought with it an order to return to Lac St. Jean and take charge of the Post there, with an increase in pay and responsibility, yet a promise of an easier life. Marie, the wife, whom Pete had always loved to call by her Indian name of Uapukun, remembered his wishes as to the children's education and longed for a sight of her tall son. When the brigade started for the south-

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land again she left with it. It was only when the canoe in which she sat rounded a headland and caused the point upon which the last home of Peter had been dug to disappear, that a flood of tears came to the woman who, for some days, had been dry-eyed and haggard. Ever after, however, the mental image of her man stood before her, in the darkness and in the light, shedding a lasting benison that made hardship easier to bear.

The canoes, in which, this time, there was little singing, swiftly shot down the great rapids of the chief branch, and in due course arrived at the Pointe Bleue, heavily laden with great bales of fur, for the last winter had been one of good hunting.

When they reached the lake Uapukun had no eyes for the marvelous new things, for the wonders at which the children cried out with astonishment. She was looking ahead, hungrily, for a sight of her first man-child. The poor little letters he had sent once or twice a year were in her bosom, things to be revered and worshiped, for to the untutored mind the simplest objects have a meaning and even a personality. The little child strikes at the object that has hurt him, and

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the soul of a woman may be wrapped in a faded flower or a bit of paper bearing a line from a beloved hand.

Ahteck knew that a new agent had been sent to Grand Lac to replace the man who had been as a father to him, and was among the many who waited on the beach after the returning brigade was sighted. He wanted and yet feared to see him, with the mother and the little ones. He had a vague, tremulous desire to behold them again, to press them to his heart, and then to run away again lest they might, being near him, be included in the coming vengeance he firmly believed must overtake him.

Finally they landed, and Uapukun had recognized him from afar, because he was so much taller than most men. She looked upon his great and handsome frame with pride, and, had there been none at hand to see, would have sobbed upon his shoulder. Ahteck's eyes grew bright with unshed tears when he heard of the passing away of Peter, but like his mother he controlled himself. Also his heart felt sore when he remembered the beauty and the lithe strength of his mother, for he helped and took to his heart a woman who had

aged a great deal and looked bent beyond her years, though still brave and strong of spirit.

The children, much grown, were delighted to see once more the man they had always called their Uncle Caribou. For weeks and months they had persistently asked for him, and shed tears because he did not return, until he had become a sort of tradition to them.

They could not cease to marvel at his great size. He was at this time fully six feet four in his thin soled moccasins, with arms and legs like shapely trunks of the silver birch. It is true that, as with nearly all other Indians, his back was already bent a little by the carrying of great loads, and the muscles at the sides of his neck stood out like great ropes from the straining against the tug of the tump-line. They found him just as gentle and kindly as ever, but were impressed by the queer sad look he always bore now, one that they had not been familiar with, for his nature had been a cheerful and happy one. Whenever he was not speaking, or toiling away at something, his great body seemed to loosen as if crushed down by a burden too great for him. It was only when he put his elbows on the table and rested his

jaws in the wide palms of his big hands, looking at the mother he loved, that a look of peace came over him.

Peter McLeod, true to his Scotch ancestry, had been a very saving man. There was little opportunity in the great Northland to spend money, and Uapukun found herself a rich woman in comparison with most of the dwellers on the reservation. With the advice of friends Ahteck had made, guided also by the missionary fathers, she bought a small house and a fair bit of ground, insisting that Ahteck, in spite of his fears, should live with her. The children were sent to school.

Ahteck seldom worked in the saw-mill now, for by this time he was much in demand by sportsmen at the various fishing clubs on the line of the railway, whom he guided for the trout and ouananiche fishing. It is true that, at first, they were apt to consider him as a great hulking surly fellow, for he never spoke but to answer their questions. But as soon as they had realized his great skill in canoes, his feats of carrying over portages and the unerring knowledge of woodcraft he had learned from Peter and from the Indians who used Grand Lac Post, they recognized him

as an invaluable man. Once he chanced to guide a party in which there was a young lady who stared at him and insisted on photographing him, declaring to her friends that he was a magnificent animal. But she was an exceedingly clever girl and, after questioning him persistently and hearing his bashful answers, insisted that the thing had a soul and was surely one of the interesting mysteries of the great North. She said that the man made her think of Ossian, and of Sagas describing the skin-clad warriors descended from Odin.

His laughter was never heard among the cheerful voices of the other Indians assembled about the anglers' camp-fires. The Montagnais, when guiding and furnished with all the tea and tobacco they want, are easily moved to merry talk among themselves, if once their suspicions that the white people may laugh at them are dispelled.

The dusky girls of the reservation would easily enough have looked upon him with favor, for he was known as a successful trapper, a man of good habits, never taking strong drink. He was comparatively well off, never having any debt at the Post, and his looks were attractive. But, with-

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out actually shunning them, he never paid the slightest attention to them. It was much as if they had not existed. Once he declared to Uapukun that he would never marry.

"Now that thou art here," he said, "it may be that no harm will come to thee or the children on my account. My life is very good. All will go well until the time is at hand when things will turn for me. For such a day must come, sooner or later. The debt must always be paid. I have no mind ever to drag a woman into the fate that is awaiting me."

It is only possible to give the gist of his words, spoken in the soft tongue of his forebears of the wilds, which only knows *thee* and *thou* in speaking to others, and, with its numberless conjugations of verbs, is a hard one indeed for a white man to learn well. But the things he said represented his firm convictions, and the sorrowing woman shared his beliefs. The curse was upon him, robbed of none of its strength by the years that had gone by. The day of atonement would certainly come; the lad awaited it, somberly but bravely, ready for the blow when it should fall. He had heard one of the priests, in the church

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which he now attended regularly, speak of an eye for an eye. The thing clearly must happen.

Uapukun sighed deeply. Her own punishment, she felt, had begun long ago. The death of her husband, she firmly believed, had been a part of it, and the future could scarcely bring her greater pain than she had suffered then, or than she suffered whenever she looked upon the tall son who had taken upon himself the greater part of her burden. Often she would go down upon her knees and pray for a long time, only to rise again with the same hopeless look upon her fast aging face.

The woman was never idle, looking after her little household, to which had been added a cow and chickens, things new to her life. She made a little money working at beautifully beaded moccasins and other things which the tourists sometimes bought, and Indians purchased her shoe-packs. Peter had possessed a cheap seal ring; it now hung from her neck, with her scapular, tied with a string of babiche, and she kissed them both, morning and night, with religious fervor.

The time was coming for Ahteck to start again with Paul Barotte for the winter's hunting. For

a few months she had possessed her great son again, and knew that his absence of many months would make the days terribly long for her, since she would daily wonder whether some frightful judgment from on high was not hovering over him. But she had no thought of trying to keep him. The hunting was his living; it was the life he longed for, the opportunity to toil so hard that for very weariness and exhaustion he would sleep, soundly, and forget the obsession that was upon him. Paul Barotte often came in. He was a cheerful soul, always singing, and his friend's taciturnity and gloom never affected him. The two children had grown fond of him, and were always glad to welcome him.

As usual they would have gone up with Jean Caron, but a few days of guiding kept them back. The older man did not care to wait, saying he did not feel very strong, that year. Doubtless the air of the woods and the clear cold would make him all right again soon. That cough of his would surely stop then, and the flesh would return to his bones. He would go up in leisurely traveling, taking things easy, for his woman also was not very strong. But Mititesh his daughter was

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growing into quite a big girl, and was very helpful, and there would be no trouble.

Therefore, on an August day, Jean Caron took his two canoes and provisions, with his wife and daughter, across the lake on a little steamer that was going to the mouth of the Peribonca. A thin film of ice had formed that night over a pail of water that had stood near the door of the house, and he was glad he had decided on an early start. On the deck of the little steamer he sat and persistently smoked a strong pipe that made him cough harder. It would surely pass off, when they reached the places where men were not all huddled up, and there was room to breathe in comfort.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE VOICE IN THE WILDERNESS

AHTECK and Paul Barotte returned from their guiding a week later. It was the first of September before they left Pointe Bleue, crossing the big lake to the mouth of the Peribonka, a large river flowing through an inlet in the twisted bed of a shallow delta half choked with the sands that come down with the Spring's murky floods. Here the hard work began.

Those unfamiliar with the needs of men in a wilderness have little idea of the enormous quantity of supplies they require. The average man, working hard, consumes at least two and a half pounds of food a day. For two men, during the nine months till the first of June, this represents over thirteen hundred pounds. As they expected to eke out their supply with game such as hare and partridges, besides a few heads of big game, if they were lucky, for it is scarce in that immediate region, they took a little less than a thousand

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pounds, mostly flour and pork and tea. Then the new traps, the ammunition, the blankets, the guns and the clothing, amounted to several hundred pounds more, and the two canoes were laden nearly to the water's edge. But it was impossible for a man alone to propel a canoe up the swift current of a strong river, so that the progress was made by the taking of one canoe up for some miles by the two hunters, who walked back on the bank to bring the other one up in turn. Over the portages, that were many, the canoes and the outfit required many trips until everything was carried over. From early morning till sundown they toiled, in the heat of the day, pestered by mosquitoes and black-flies innumerable, their bodies dripping with sweat.

Reaching the first falls they carried over and paddled again, meeting with other stupendous cataracts, till they reached the place where the river Aleck joins the main stream. Here they turned to the left, meeting with another hard carry, and entered some dead waters that soon gave place to fiercely rough rapids where their iron-shod poles clanked noisily over the rocky bottom. Often they were compelled to get out and

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walk on the bed of the torrent, the icy water surging nearly up to their waists, and pull the canoes up by main force. Here the portages were mostly over bad trails, for this river is but little traveled.

After more than a week of hard and anxious toil, for they were somewhat late, they reached the first lake and paddled along its length of some twelve miles to the mountain-shadowed waters of its inlet, then up a shallow stream into the second lake, the home of great fork-tailed touladi and big red trout. From here their way was along another little river.

A few miles away from the lake they found Jean Caron's log shack. The family had arrived the day before, although they had left with over a week's start. The man was already encamped with his wife and Mititesh, his daughter, who was now thirteen and well-grown for her years. Between her and her parents there was a painful contrast. Jean was coughing badly and mentioned with the most stolid indifference the fact that he had spat some blood, while carrying big loads during the journey over the portages. With the wonderful hopefulness of most consumptives he declared that he would soon be entirely well again.

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The cold of the coming winter would cure him. The bleeding only came because he had lifted packs that were too heavy, he asserted. His wife also was a feeble-looking woman who had always worked much too hard during the course of an arduous life, during which she had borne several other children and lost them. As with many of the Indian women, she was already quite old at a time when those of milder climes would have been in the strength of their years. The two young men stopped with them for a day, to help them with the provision of wood for fuel, and piled up a great mound for them. Jean gave it as his opinion that the year would be a bad one for *uapush*, the rabbits. The two women, on the way, had set many snares overnight, but the catch was almost nothing. Moreover they had lost a fifty-pound bag of flour. Jean's foot had slipped in the canoe, while he was trying to put the bag ashore at the foot of a rapid. He had fallen in the water but had been saved because Mititesh, the child, had quickly thrown him the end of a tump-line. But the bag had been rolled down in the rapids and into deep water.

Still, he had no doubt that there were provi-

sions enough to carry them over the winter, with care, and providing it should not last too long. He had seen tracks of moose. They were never plentiful in that part of the country, yet he might have the luck to kill one, later on, when the cold weather would allow the meat to keep long. It would be a great help to them. As to caribou he had seen no signs, but some might come later on, for they were great wanderers, here one day and gone the next.

"If you should have trouble," said Ahteck, "you know the place of our camp, thirty miles above this, and doubtless we will come down again for Christmas."

The man nodded. The two lads had packed up their tent and loaded the canoes, ready to start. They filled their pipes anew and shook hands. Mititesh came forward, sorry to see them leave. Ahteck took off a bright red neckerchief he had worn about his neck and handed it to her. She shook her head at first, rather bashfully, but finally she was glad to take it, and wished them good luck.

So they entered their canoes again, for there was an easy bit of dead water ahead.

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"*Iamek ouelipisish!* Good-by!" they shouted, and plied their paddles again, with Ahteck silent and thoughtful, as usual, while Paul, an incorrigibly cheerful fellow, roared out a French song of the voyageurs:

"Nous cherchons les rives lointaines  
Les grands lacs purs et silencieux,  
Dans les bois les claires fontaines,  
Qui reflètent l'azur des cieux."

They reached their camp on the sixteenth day after leaving the reservation, having worked over every bit of the way from two to four times. It was a good journey. Many hunting parties, going farther north, take a couple of months to reach their camps and yet are able to return in as many weeks, carrying nothing but the pelts gathered during the season, with just enough food for the journey back.

They found their little shack in good order. The small cast-iron stove was hardly rusted at all, for they had taken pains to grease it thoroughly before leaving in the spring, as well as the traps. There was a great deal of work to be attended to before the winter's work began in earnest. They made a huge provision of firewood,

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overhauled the steel traps, prepared stretching rings and the flat boards used for cased pelts, and saw carefully to the babiche of their snow-shoes.

A couple of days after their arrival they noticed that fish-heads they had thrown on the bank had disappeared. Immediately they built small deadfalls and the next day found a couple of mink.

These were looked over very carefully, since, in the wilderness, even small matters may forecast important things.

"The fur is already heavy," said Paul, cheerfully. "It is a good beginning."

"Yes, the hair is long and thick," assented Ah-teck, "and it is the sign of a long, cold winter."

They considered this easy catch as an omen of good luck, and the trapping soon began, after the first small flurries of snow that melted fast on the ground. Going over their fifty miles of line they set their traps and built deadfalls, baiting them carefully, and repaired two small shacks they used as night shelters in bad weather. On this first

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journey Ahteck killed a good dog-otter with his rifle, and although it sank in a pool it was retrieved from the bottom with a long stick.

Soon the winter began in earnest, the cold coming with giant strides, with the swift changes that mark succeeding seasons in the great north. The woods, that had been a resplendent glory of golden and crimson leafage splashed against the somber greens of conifers, rapidly assumed a brown, duller tint. Great storms arose during which high trees, enfeebled by the boring of insects and weevils, by the invasion of hungry growths of lesser plants at their foot, or by the exhaustion of the soil in the crannies in which they had taken root, tottered and fell, crashing loudly down into the under-growth. At first the snows came in large moist flakes followed by sharp clear weather that was succeeded by the coming of the great white pall of winter swirling down in tiny sand-like granules and crystals. After this the sun came out again, the shallower waters of lakes and rivers grew solid while elsewhere the two-foot ice began to form. The streams were entirely covered, although at the foot of rapids and falls great air-

holes were left, from which drifting steam-clouds rose, covering twigs and branches with a bediamonded tracery of frost-lace.

Life, at present, became a constant round of long solitary trips, the men working in different directions and only meeting, perhaps once in every five or six days, at the main camp. At first they were a good deal bothered by weasels, that were already in the winter pelage of white, with the tiny tail spotted at the end with black. However high may be the price of ermine in the great marts, they often bring but ten cents apiece at the posts, and are more trouble than they are worth, stealing bait and springing traps intended for better game. But after a while they were fairly cleaned out and other animals were caught.

As they had foreseen, the winter proved a hard one that year; there were constant falls of snow which often covered up most of the traps, in spite of the little shelters of branches made to protect them, and entailing much hard work all along the line. Then every snowfall was followed by cold growing more and more bitter, till mittened fingers grew numb, and the skin of their faces blackened and cracked and bled. It became so

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intense that, when they were traveling, rather lightly clad, since very heavy clothing impedes fast going, and chanced to be unable to reach one of the small shacks, they would sometimes be sleepless all night, building great fires lest they might freeze to death. On very still nights, when there was little danger from flying sparks and embers, they could build two fires and lie down between them for short sleeps, till more fuel had to be added. But on one occasion the wind arose suddenly, and Paul's clothes caught fire so that he was rather badly singed before he could roll in the snow.

But when they reached the main camp and its comforting small stove they remained together for a day or two, and Paul would chatter of the incidents of the week, refer to a fine girl of the reservation who, he asserted, looked on him with no unfavorable eye, and bawl out more songs while they looked over the pelts and stretched them carefully, mended their clothes and shoepacks, resting a little after the dull weariness of great and lonely toil. But soon they would start off again, through the wilderness that was bound fast in the shackles of the terrible frost in which the sweat of their strain-

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ing bodies turned to ice upon their skins, whenever they stopped overlong.

Christmas was not very far off when, one day, they met again at the main camp. Ahteck had managed to shoot a young bull moose, and came in with a tremendous load of meat, which was hung up in a place of safety, frozen hard, and fat which they tried into empty cans for future use. The remainder he had carefully put away on a high scaffold, out of reach of foxes and other robbers. It would keep all winter.

They spoke of soon celebrating the day by going to visit the Carons, to whom they would bring a good present of meat. They would all speak of the women and children far to the south, who would throng the little church of the Oblate Fathers and lift up their voices in song at the midnight mass. There would be great steaks of the moose, fried in fat, and there was also some of the fine white meat of a lynx. The tea would be flavored with more than the usual small portion of sugar, which, in bitter cold, man craves exceedingly.

They were thoroughly contented, for the trapping, thus far, had proved most successful, and,

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if it continued at the same rate, would be the best since they had begun to hunt together. Paul, as usual, was most cheerful, telling for the thousandth time venerable jokes while Ah-teck listened, with that faraway look in his eyes, the weariness of his great sorrow still upon him like a killing load that would never be lifted.

The days were short indeed. It was only four o'clock but the sun was already low down on the horizon, bathing the great snow-covered world in a flood of crimson. Paul had just repeated, as he counted on his fingers, the tally of their goodly store of pelts. They had many hides of mink and marten, of the fierce fishers that are said to be able to run down and kill foxes, with some lynx and otters and large bundles of marten. After this he went on to speak of a *carcajou*, or wolverine, that had been robbing some traps with the devilish ingenuity of his kind, and of many unavailing efforts to capture the beast. As the supply of wood for the stove would need replenishing for the night he drew on his mittens, pulled his old fur cap down over his ears and opened the door.

For a moment he stopped on the sill, to see

what manner of weather the sunset was portending for the next day. Suddenly he turned his head to one side, listening eagerly, with the breath steaming from his open mouth.

"Oh, Ahtech!" he called.

Swiftly his companion jumped to his side and they both stood still, listening keenly.

"What was it?" asked Ahtech.

Then, from the tangle and the wilderness of the thick woods just to the south of them arose a cry that was no howl of *Maigan*, the wolf, or of *Uapukulu*, the great white Arctic owl, but surely the call of a man in distress.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE LAST JOURNEY OF JEAN CARON

IN spite of the fierce cold and the terrible toil they had been experiencing, the tale of the earlier winter had been one of success for the two young men. To the south of them, however, the march of events had culminated in disaster.

Jean Caron had continued, like a brave man, to make light of his trouble and to indulge in hopes probably based in part on ignorance of the real nature of his malady. With the coming of frost he would be better; daily he declared that he was stronger; yes, he was growing thinner, but this was due to the hard work! Such were the illusions with which he encouraged himself and, to some extent, deceived the girl and the woman who shared his hardships. He traveled his long line as formerly, but at night slept exhausted, racked by a continual cough, bathed by perspirations that chilled him to the bone when he rose in the morning and tottered in search of fuel for

more fire wherewith to warm himself and boil his tea, of which he took a great deal, black and with the last trace of bitterness extracted from the leaves.

Despite his strenuous efforts he could not travel as fast as formerly, and managed to attend to but few traps every day, so that his absences grew longer and the woman, with her child, awaited him during the short days and the interminable nights, with an awful dread of disaster impending. Better than Jean, perhaps, she realized the scantiness of their stock of provisions, and denied herself that more might be left for the others. She was also growing thinner and feebler, and it is probable that, for a long time, she had suffered from some internal illness.

Mititesh took upon herself the tending of a fair part of the line, as far as she could cover it in a day's travel, for her mother was always anxious lest something should happen to the child, and feared to be left alone to spend the nights. The girl worked with indomitable energy, in the measure of her strength. Gradually the cooking devolved upon her, and the cutting of firewood and stretching of the few skins she obtained and those

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the man brought in, so that she became gaunt with overwork, though still strong on account of her youth.

Jean left early one morning, his wife staring at him as he disappeared through the woods on his snowshoes, swaying in his gait more like a man returning utterly exhausted from a long hunt than one just starting for a four days' trip. She was conscious of his indomitable courage, but it terrified her. She had tried to prevail on him to remain longer in camp, to rest until greater strength should return, but he had shaken his head, fastened the thongs about his feet and departed, the snowshoes seeming to drag after him, as he bent forward, apparently overburdened by the light load of his gun and the small pack containing his blankets and food, with some bait.

They had a small dog with them, of the nondescript breed found among the canoe Indians. They prefer small animals, for the heavier ones take room in the canoes and require more food. Those who take larger dogs are compelled to let them run along the banks of rivers, where they have to find their way through frightful tangles and swim many smaller streams to follow their

masters. Mititesh was fond of the little rough-coated thing, that was as yet little more than a pup and followed her in the woods whenever she went out to her traps.

Jean Caron had been gone but a few hours when Mititesh, who had left soon after, going in an opposite direction, returned to the camp with a hare she had snared and a fine marten. She was happy. It was a good day's work and the mother, who had been mending a ragged pair of trousers belonging to her man, smiled at the child and praised her.

"Wilt thou skin the hare?" said Mititesh. "I will go out and cut more wood. There will be light for a short time yet."

The woman swiftly prepared the hare and cut it in pieces, intending to cook a small portion of it and to keep the rest for Jean. She placed some pieces in the frying pan, after melting fat in which the meat soon sizzled, and turned it over with a sharp stick. Presently it was nearly done and she went out, in the intense cold, to call the child. But the latter was some distance away, for all the near-by wood had long been used up,

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and she had to walk a short distance before calling.

In the meanwhile the small dog, with the never-satisfied hunger of his kind, had been sniffing outside the shack. The woman had forgotten to latch the door from outside, in her haste, and a small paw pulled it open. The meat was still frying, sending forth heavenly odors, and the pup leaped for it. There was a yell as he fell back with scalded feet. He had borne down on the handle of the pan, which upset. Some of the fat fell on the stove, where it blazed at once, and ran down to the floor, covered with long-dried boughs of balsam. In a moment they were burning fiercely. The woman had heard the yell, and saw the dog running out of the place. She hurried back and a blinding cloud of smoke was issuing from the door. She shouted for Mititesh, who dropped her ax and came running through the heavy snow. The river was frozen hard and they had been in the habit of melting ice for water. The child sought to enter the shack but was driven out by the flames. Her futile efforts to throw snow inside were of no avail, and an hour later

the two were standing, haggard and terrified, near the remains of their winter home that was now a mass of charred, smoking logs. Jean's provision of black gunpowder had ignited and caused a severe explosion. Though Mititesh continued to throw snow on the ruins, while her mother had sunk down at the foot of a tree, they continued to smolder during the whole night, the cloud of smoke rising high and drifting over the woodland.

The food stored in the place was gone, as were the blankets and the meager lot of fur caught until then.

Fortunately there stood outside an old tent, quite worn out, that had served to cover the two canoes. With this Mititesh managed to build a very inadequate shelter, outside of which she built a big fire, for warmth. Her mother had wept during the livelong night and, when she lay down, shivering, looked so jaded and exhausted that the child's tears finally came also. Finally she went away to make the rounds of her snares, hoping to find another rabbit, but returned an hour later with empty hands.

For two long days they waited, starving, the little dog whining dismally with hunger and the

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pain of his burns, and finally Jean Caron, tottering, arrived and saw the ruins of his camp and collapsed at the side of the weeping women. He had a mink, which Mititesh skinned, and they roasted the little animal before the fire and ate it, scarcely a mouthful apiece.

Then Mititesh arose. Her snowshoes, fortunately, had been outside the cabin, and she took them and, kneeling, began to fasten them to her feet.

"Where art thou going?" asked the mother, anxiously.

"I must go north to the camp of Ahteck the big hunter," she said. "I must bring back food."

The woman wept again, declaring that it was too long a journey for the child, that she would be lost, as she had never been there, that she would fall by the way and freeze to death.

"Thou shalt stay with thy mother," suddenly declared Jean Caron. "It is hardly thirty miles but the country is rough. A very strong man could do it in one day, but I fear it will take me two. There is no food here, but the *Ahtum*, the little dog is left. Thou shalt kill it so that thy mother may not perish with hunger, and eat some

thyself. I go at once and will return as soon as I can. Look to thy snares again, every day, for a hare might help to save your lives. Good-by!"

He was the man. His authority had never been discussed. They let him go but the woman moaned at his departure, and Mititesh felt a sense of terror overcoming her, as she looked at the little dog she loved, which she would have to kill with her own hands.

Bravely Jean Caron faced the frightful journey. There was no beaten path. At times the way was over the frozen surface of the little river and its rugged covering of snow, blown in great drifts or waving in ridges through the sweep of the winds. But there were many rapids where the ice was terribly broken up, and in which air-holes, sometimes deceptively concealed by thin layers of snow-covered ice, were a source of danger. Then the man would have to scramble up the banks again and find his way through the tangle of alder thickets, push through dead vines twined among old windfalls, scramble over prostrate trunks of trees and around rocks scattered at the foot of the big hills. He had never gone over this country, and, although he was greatly helped by his

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lifelong experience of journeying in the wilderness, met with such toil as would have deterred most white men.

Late in the day, as he stumbled on, harassed by the cough which often brought blood to his lips, he saw a spruce-hen, most foolish of birds, sitting on the limb of a sapling. With a string looped and fastened at the end of a stick he snared it and stopped to eat it, sitting before a small fire, over which he also made some tea.

When night overtook him he spread his blankets on the ground and rested, despairingly conscious that the day's awful going had only taken him about half way. In the morning, before sunrise, after a night in which the chill had kept his thin jaws chattering so that sleep had only come at fitful intervals, he started again, panting with distress, after drinking his small potful of scalding tea, for there was no food. He went on, sometimes hurrying as if a pack of wolves were on his trail, sometimes tottering until the sweat returned to his brow and froze there, from the fear that he might fall and never rise again, and that the waiting women at the camp would starve while he lay dead in his tracks.

It is possible that at times his mind wandered a little. At any rate it is certain that, for long intervals, he was no longer conscious of the passing of time, of the fierce weariness of his limbs, of the tortured chest through which his hissing, hurried breaths came out in small white clouds. But always before him the main purpose remained. The dread came to him rather suddenly that he was dying. Like others suffering from the white plague of humanity he had been loath to acknowledge it to himself, but now the truth had become clear to him, and he faced it as his ancestors might have faced the stake of torture, bravely, with never a whine or a complaint. He would have given anything for the bliss of lying down beneath the trees, in some spot sheltered a little from the keen wind that bit at his wasted flesh, and falling into that last sleep that means surcease from pain and peace everlasting. But in the poor ignorant mind of the life-weary savage the thin, hungry woman and the brave child were ever-present. His last breaths, the uttermost efforts of his exhausted frame, must be put forth to save them, and he kept on, and on, interminably, it seemed to him. He had no consciousness

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of being a martyr, a man devoting his last heartbeats to the love of others. It was the simplest sort of a duty, an instinctive sense such as the one that prompts the dog or the horse to obey the master's urging till they drop dead in the sledge or under the saddle.

When afternoon drew on a new fear came upon him, and he hurried faster. Unless he reached Ahtech's camp that night he would have to stop again in the wilderness, and the coming of another day would find him unable to go on, or sleeping his last sleep. He must reach the place before the darkness came, and again he hurried as if under the prick of spurs or the blows of the long-lashed dog-whip.

He was compelled to remain in sight of the river, as much as was possible. A vague idea came to him that he had perhaps already passed the camp, and was going on and on through the forest, running away from the haven of safety. He actually stopped for a time, panting and coughing, obsessed with the awful idea. But he went on again and, coming once more in sight of the river, close to some rapids, saw a blaze mark showing the direction of the portage. None but the two young

men could have marked the tree, for there were no trappers north of them in that country, and he went on again, while the sun came down lower and lower towards the horizon, threatening soon to leave the world in darkness.

Again he had to leave the river-side and clamber over a rocky hill, to avoid thick alder swamps and the hummocky ground. He tried to urge his limbs to faster travel but they refused and he tottered on, leaning hard upon a stick he had cut as the crimsoning sky threatened him with fast approaching blackness.

Soon, under the trees, the dusk began to come, threateningly, and he stumbled on, beginning to despair yet unwilling to stop, until he was stumbling and falling and it took frightful effort to rise again and keep on his way.

And then, suddenly, his nostrils caught the blessed scent of wood-smoke drifting towards him. The fire might yet be far away, but it was there, there, ahead of him, burning brightly, warming food, giving comfort to men and awaiting his coming.

The stick dropped from his hands and he scrambled on, drunkenly, sometimes falling and keep-

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ing on, crawling on hands and knees. The darkness was coming but the smell of smoke was growing stronger. At last he saw small sparks arising in the sky, that twinkled like beckoning stars. He was near! The women would be safe! He would be able to lie down, in a place that would be warm, and they would pour warm tea between his frosted lips, and give him food and then a rest under warm blankets, and sleep would come, restful, heavenly!

And then he fell again and could not rise, in spite of all his efforts. Yet he could see the shack, it was near, and through the small window a light was shining. Then he called, his voice raucous and halting, and called again and again.

The door was opened, and he saw the shadow of a man standing there, and presently another joined him. Then, hoarsely, he called again and rolled over, unconscious.

## CHAPTER X

### A VOYAGE OF RESCUE

AHTECK pulled his *tuque* over his ears and, taking no time to put on his snowshoes, floundered off in the deep snow, bucking it like a moose, tearing through the thick alders and young growth that sought to hold him back. His keen ears had located the place from which the cry had come, not over fifty yards away. In a moment he had reached it and, bending over, lifted up in his arms the spent form of the man. Heedless of the load he plunged back towards the camp as if his burden had been the body of a mere child.

Once within the shack, where Paul had hurriedly lighted a candle, they saw that the Indian was breathing and was returning to consciousness.

"Mother of Heaven!" cried Paul. "It is that poor Jean Caron! Something must have happened!"

Then, tenderly, they partly undressed him and rubbed the life back in his poor wasted limbs.

Before they would allow him to speak they gave him hot tea, which he swallowed wolfishly, crying also for food. But he began to cough distressingly, and the others were compelled to realize that the decimating plague of their race had well-nigh ended its work.

Hurriedly, between gasps, while Jean Caron ate and drank, he managed to tell them what had occurred. It was but one of the all too frequent tales of disaster such as all trappers are familiar with in the country of the Grand Nord. The details, of course, are of infinite variety, but there is always the somber background of cold, of starvation and, but too often, of a disease lingering for years, perhaps to end swiftly in the wilderness after more than wonted toil and exposure. He explained how the cough and the weakness had become so bad that he had been able to do little work, sometimes lying idly in the tent for many hours while the women had tried to do some of his work. He had been no longer the man who had once been able to show the endurance and the heart of a wild thing, traveling amazing distances on trapping lines, fighting against the killing cold and the hard go-

ing through mountainous snow-drifts, over hummocky swamps, among the forests in which the tangled trees of windfalls and the tottering ones are like pitfalls. Indeed it is no wonder that, for these men, the whole world appears to be filled with things of evil that await them at every turn, as the *loup-cervier* awaits the hare and the spotted fawn.

And now, the sick man told them, things were terrible at the camp. It was *e shiuelinatuts*, the great famine, for even the blankets had all been burned up, excepting the two he had taken with him on his line of traps. He had been obliged to take one on this trip, leaving the other. The stored food was all gone, and there was nothing but the clothing they had stood in. Perhaps the little stove had not suffered much. The small amount of fur that had been caught was gone, and the world was a very hard place, and the ways of God were very mysterious, and he felt a great sleepiness and wanted to lie down.

"All of two long days it took for me to come here," he finally said, gasping. "There was no power in my limbs, that have turned to little sticks. Also I had no food with me, though yes-

terday I killed a partridge. It was but small, one of the red-eyed black ones. The women will be living yet because I told them to eat the dog. It is but a small canoe-dog, as thou knowest, and will not last them long. Also the little *atum* is very lean, for food has been scarce with us."

After he had eaten as much as he desired, which was not a great deal, since he was very weak, they placed him in one of the two bunks built against the wall and covered him with blankets, after which he soon closed his eyes, being utterly exhausted. But the two lads realized that his efforts to reach them in order to save the lives of his women had left his own flickering like the flame of a candle in the wind, and that it would soon be extinguished.

Even before the man had finished his brief account of the misfortunes that had brought him to seek help, Ahteck had begun to make ready for his journey. To him the trip would be an easier one. He had gone over the ground several times and knew the lay of the land. He would be able to avoid many of the terrible places through which Jean Caron had been compelled to flounder. Paul allowed him to do so, without a word, although

he would have been glad to take the trip upon himself. On his part it was mere recognition of the fact that when unusual effort was required no man could prove stronger, more efficient and determined than his friend. In his pack Ahtech put a small package of tea, with some flour and fat pork. There was also a large piece of boiled moose-meat, together with his tea-kettle and frying pan. Then he rolled up his blankets also and took his gun, seeing that the magazine was full of cartridges, and looked carefully to the webbing of his snowshoes. Deliberate as he was in his movements, the young man never wasted effort. Things were done by him easily, simply, even slowly, and were finished before most other men would have been half-way through their work.

He was ready to leave when a severe fit of coughing aroused Jean Caron. The man understood at once the import of the big lad's preparations and looked at him, gratefully.

"I am much afraid for my woman," he said. "I know that thou wilt help her if thou art able. Also my heart is very sore for the child, my little daughter Mititesh, though the life is stronger within her and she will surely be living. I cannot

last long and, in case of need, I leave her in thy keeping, knowing what a good man and a kind friend thou art."

Ahteck went up to him and took his clammy hand within his own. The Indian looked up at the young giant, whose great limbs showed the power to crush a way through resistance, to overcome all difficulties, to put forth more than ordinary human strength on his errand of mercy.

"May the Father in Heaven bless thee!" he said, "and guide thy footsteps! I would say more, but I cannot."

The man's head sank down again upon the piled up balsam boughs that served as a pillow, and closed his eyes in unutterable weariness.

"I will return here as soon as I can," declared Ahteck, "but I know not how soon it may be. I promise to bring them back here with me, if—if the Lord permits, and I will take care of thy child Mititesh, who shall be like a sister to me, I promise."

The man nodded, weakly lifting a hand in a vague motion that seemed to carry a blessing. Paul Barotte had acquiesced, quietly, with a mere inclination of his head. Their provisions, mea-

gerly sufficient for two, would now have to be shared among a larger number. This might even spell disaster for all, but they were ready, doing it naturally, as a matter of course, according to the immemorial law of the northern wilderness, that has ordained that the food of one shall belong to all when once the black wings of starvation begin to hover over famished men. Paul opened the door of the shack and looked out.

"It is black night," he said. "It will be better to wait."

But Ahteck shook his head and stepped out of doors, kneeling down to fasten his snowshoes.

"Stay thou with the man Jean," he told Paul. "Do not leave him at all, lest he should pass away when there is no one by him to pray for his soul. I know not whether I will be able to bring the woman here, or if she is able to travel. It is a long journey for one that is sick. Therefore do not worry if I am away a long time. A man can only do his best."

"*Adieu*, may God guide thee," said Paul.

Then Ahteck rose and passed the broad band of the tump-line over the heavy cap that covered his brow. He took his gun in his left hand and

held the right to his friend, who pressed it, in silence, and watched him disappear in the blackness of the night, that had come very fast. Then he returned to the shack, where Jean Caron was now sleeping. He filled the stove with wood anew, closing the draughts so that it would not burn too fast, said his prayers and went to bed, merely removing his long *bottes sauvages* and his *capot*, or heavy woollen coat, that he might be ready at once if the sick man needed him.

During this time, in the great silence seldom broken in the dark hours of the northern winter nights, Ahtech went on. He could see a little, of course, for the night is never utterly black and the clouds that had accumulated over the sky were being broken up and swept away by a newly-risen wind. There was no made trail for him to follow and it was rather hard going. He picked his way as he followed the downward trend of the little river but avoided its bed, that was treacherous enough in the full light of day and always rough and irregular with great drifts and piled up ice.

Soon, excepting under the great trees, it became less dark, and presently, in the sky, stars began to

shine in myriads until, later on, their light was dimmed by the lambent flames of the northern lights. These, in great streaky masses, appeared to be chasing one another over the vastness of the firmament; suddenly they would disappear utterly in one place, only to return at another. Then they would gather and march across the sky like serried legions of invading warriors, to fade away as if some mighty power had swept them into some other world. Yet in a few minutes they would burst out afresh like an army returning in triumphal glory.

The young man went on and on, his deep lungs working steadily, his heart beating quietly, while his mind, so often tortured, was unusually serene, since the importance of his mission drove away, for the time being, the thoughts that were always harrying him. He had enjoyed a full day's rest at the camp, and the perfect training of the trapper showed in the ease of his steady progress.

Yes! The life of the great north was always full of such incidents as this; they were a natural, inevitable concomitant, and formed the subject of tales innumerable he had listened to since his earliest years of boyhood. They left him per-

fectly calm, and he calculated his chances and made his plans with a cool, experienced mind. The hardships of the earthly world meant nothing to him but bodily pain, that was but a small thing compared to the tortures of a soul pursued by evil spirits bent on revenge. His obsession was so great that the fiercest toil meant surcease to him, while rest and idleness brought suffering.

When he made his way through the thicker woods he often had to go very slowly, for he passed through rough places where fallen timber lay thickly on the ground, and rocks were strewn in his path. And yet it was no hardship. Uneringly he picked out the best going, with little thought, having some of the instinct of wild things, and more than their endurance, since in hard traveling afoot in rough country the ability to keep on going is indissolubly linked with the capacity to stand pain. After a time the frost bites the face and causes even thickly gloved fingers to tingle and ache; the strongest thews become rebellious and have to be forced on; the back bearing the load which pulls on the head, and gnaws into the shoulders, becomes alive to an insidious distress which at first only irks, and later

hurts, dully, stupidly, until it becomes a torment that refuses to pass away. But the man inured to such things keeps on and on, knowing his power to stand his trials and having an experience that teaches him how far away lies the limit of a true man's courage.

Ahtech kept on going, steadily, with great strides whenever the nature of the ground permitted, and shorter, careful ones in hard places. He judged that he had gone about ten miles, in a little over five hours, or a third of the way, when the sky became darker again. Small flurries of snow were beginning to sweep down, and he decided that it would be better to stop. He knew that he would make no great headway and had not intended to go any farther that night. A man's strength is not to be wasted any more than his food, and Ahtech knew that on the next day he would need all the power he had. Stopping in the lee of a great cliff arising close to the river, that was further sheltered by a growth of tall spruces and firs, he built a small fire and boiled his kettle. A cup of hot tea in which he broke pieces of a frozen flap-jack refreshed him. Then he took out his blankets and, with a snowshoe,

cleared a place of the softer snow. He was well content to have progressed thus far, leaving a shorter journey for the morrow. It is probable that his Indian blood prevented the eagerness to go on that a white man would have shown, and doubtless obeyed. He acted according to the dictates of pure common sense, knowing that further travel during the night would mean the covering of but a short distance, attended with absolute exhaustion. He knew well what he could accomplish by starting just before daylight on the next day, and as soon as he had rolled himself up in his blankets he slept quietly, while a wandering fox scented him and stopped short, to scoot away again, and a snowy owl perched above him, watching silently, with great bulging eyes, ready to pounce from the darkness upon some luckless hare or rat. Far away, on the high hills, wolves wandered, scenting the snow for a warm trail. But there was no danger to the man in these things, and he slept on till the stars began to fade and the eastern horizon gradually lightened. Then he awoke with a start, all senses immediately alert, and lighted another fire to melt icicles he broke off from the rocks in order to brew his tea.

## CHAPTER XI

### THE SAVING OF MITITESH

THE snow was still falling slightly when he resumed his journey in a dull light that was quite sufficient to allow him to pick out his way without much trouble. Now he would never stop again until he reached Jean Caron's camping place.

The constant problem of finding the best trail kept his thoughts busily engaged. The general lie of the land was perfectly clear to him, and often he left the river far to one side, knowing his way through tiny valleys and along high hardwood ridges, in a general direction. He noted landmarks that would help on the return journey, and once carefully blazed a tree at a spot where there were many fresh marten tracks. The eighteen or twenty miles that remained to be covered were certainly much harder than forty would have been in an open country, not so much in the matter of speed but owing to the greater exertion the rough traveling entailed. He always kept practi-

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cally on the line of his former journeys with Paul, but where there is no clear path the going changes greatly from year to year. There are great drifts where, at other times, one might have found clear ground. Fresh windfalls block the way and great rocks split off by the frost from high ledges may compel wide turns. Yet as the man traveled on his speed increased rather than diminished, as the second wind came and he began to move more mechanically. He was not conscious that he was doing something very wonderful, beyond the strength of most men. He hardly ever ran, owing to the dreadful surface, but the great length and power of his stride carried him along, in the semi-darkness of the deep woods, like some ghostly thing that might have floated through the forest.

And later on, when the incandescent mass of the sun had risen through a narrow line of clear sky that was beginning to show under the slate-colored pall of the clouds above, and while he kept on just as fast, a duller condition of his mind came on, due probably to a fatigue he scarcely felt and which in no wise lessened the efficiency of his muscles. A little later, very gradually, as he sped

on, leaping over fallen trunks, clambering over ledges that meant a little short cut, his thoughts reverted to the tragedy of his own life. Once more it seemed to be all enacted before him—the arrival of the strangers, the angry voices in the woods, the coming down of that gunstock, the pitching forward of the tall man, the gruesome night in the darkness his mother and he had chosen to sit in as if fearing to see each other's face, and finally the journey to the south. And then he had seen the old priest, the man of good counsel, who had been kind but had disclaimed the ability to extend absolute forgiveness. The consoling words and the hand lain gently on his shoulders had, to some extent, been as a soothing balm to his soul. He had been told that, after a life of repentance and prayer, with hatred of his action, he might hope for forgiveness and a cleansing of his soul. But then the priest said that vengeance belonged to the Lord. He had heard them speak of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. This was surely the way of God. In the great desert people spoke of, on the other side of the great waters, a people had been guided. Under the leadership of men chosen from on high they

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had met enemies and smitten them to destruction. The women and children also had been slain, or carried away into slavery. This was because the curses of God did not fall upon the men alone but also on all they loved. The sins of parents were visited on children. It was all very clear to the lad's obsessed brain. The curse must come, and he could await it bravely, without fear for himself. That which harrowed him, however, was the terror of the things that must happen to others, on his account.

Yes, there was need of constant prayer and of sacrifice. He had never thought of giving himself up to the authorities in order to expiate the deed after the fashion of the white men. What could such an atonement mean but death, of which he had no fear? Moreover, strangely enough, in his essentially savage soul he felt no guilt. The beaver that goes into the trap is guilty of no sin. He had been like a man resting under a tree that had suddenly fallen and crushed him, wherefore he had been crippled. He had stepped upon the film of snow covering an air-hole and been dragged under the ice. The real yet vague impression made upon him was that he had been

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fatally plunged in a great vortex from which no human soul could save him, and the responsibility of which lay with weird powers of darkness.

With a perfectly natural reversion to old heathen tendencies it appeared to him that the great forces of good and evil had been contending, as the lightning battles against the high spurs of snow-tipped mountains, and the evil ones had chanced to prevail. He had been caught in the meshes of a net cast by some irresponsible power that was the one concerned with the dealing out of hunger and cold, of storm and devastation, of all the things that are always in wait, ready to pounce upon men and crush them. And these meshes continued to bind him, more and more tightly, while he had little hope that, in some manner he could not fathom, they would ever break asunder and leave him free at last, and clean, a man among men, no longer a thing befouled and marked for destruction.

But for his bit of reading and writing, both painfully acquired, the big lad had no education of the white men. His beliefs were a mingling of the teachings of priests with atavistic tendencies

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towards Indian ideas of things supernatural, in which *Tshishe Manitou*, the great good spirit that brought abundance and success, was engaged in unending warfare against *Matshi-Manitou*, the evil begetter of soffrow and disaster. He had not the slightest doubt that he bore an influence perilous to others, owing to the curse he labored under. His constant success as a trapper and the fact that he was always thriving could make not the slightest difference in the trend of his ideas. To him it was only the calm that is always greatest before the storm, the light that comes before the darkness. Some terrible thing must be hanging over his life, as hangs over the woodland the smoke of forests burning hundreds of miles away.

He had been going on instinctively, always in the right direction, with his brain lost in the mazes and the vagueness of his untutored notions, when he suddenly realized that he was nearing the end of his journey. Presently, coming out on the banks of the river, he noted a familiar landmark. A little farther on he detected a thin film of smoke rising in the frosty air. He fired his gun and ran as if he had just started, going like a bull moose

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that has just heard the bellow of the cow, fleet yet and of marvelous strength.

As he came nearer he saw a ragged little tent made up of pieces of canvas and bark. Near at hand were the charred remains of the old log-shack. He shouted as he ran and the child came out and tottered towards him gaunt and haggard, the light of her big eyes dulled with suffering. He caught her up in his arms, saying kind words, and entered the tent. A form was stretched upon the ground, lying under a half-burned blanket.

"She does not move any more," said the girl Mititesh. "Since yesterday, an hour after the coming of night, she has not spoken, and moved but little, and later on her breathing stopped, wherefore I knew she was dead. We have been very hungry. We killed the dog, but he was small and very thin. It hurt me here, under my breast, to kill him, for he was a tiny thing when he was given to me. So I took the gun, while he was lying asleep, and came near. He awoke, and his tail wagged, and then I put the gun to his head and pulled the trigger, shutting my eyes. And then my mother would not eat and I could not keep her warm. This tent has many holes and

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the stove makes no heat here, and much smoke. Also I could not cut wood fast enough. I prayed very much, all the time, and mostly I prayed that thou wouldest come soon."

She threw herself down, exhausted, but her eyes were dry. Tears that had run down her cheeks were frozen there, making sore red furrows, but no more were coming. She was young indeed to have already dried the fount of sorrow.

Ahteck knelt by the dead woman and said a short prayer, after which he immediately went to work, wondering, darkly, whether his own presence, thirty miles away, had been responsible for the bringing on these people of such a spell of death and wreck and ruin.

But he cut wood, carefully with short choppy blows, lest in the fierce cold his ax might splinter away, and soon made the little stove roar again. After this he immediately went to cooking.

"Here is tea, little Mititesh," he said. "Here is also moose-meat. It is very good. Eat now, but very slowly, and only a little at first, because fast eating would make thee vomit and beget cramps inside thee. I know, because I have been very hungry in my time, and have also seen others

weak with the great hunger. I have brought sugar—we still have some left. Take some, because it will be good for thee, but only a little in thy tea. I will also eat now, for I am hungry with much walking."

He was watching the child as tenderly as a woman, cutting the meat for her and pouring out the tea.

"Stop, now, it is enough," he soon said. "I know it is not much for thy hunger, but have a little patience. In a short time thou shalt have more to eat. See, I have brought heavy blankets—big warm red ones from the Company. They are good ones. To-night thou wilt sleep warmly. Let me wrap thee well now, and before long I will awaken thee for more food."

The child stood up, swaying a little. Ahteck was still sitting and she placed her hands on one of his shoulders. Her face touched his neck and for a moment she sobbed there, while he clumsily patted her thin back. It had been a weird repast, with the big red sun beginning to disappear behind the tall spruces and firs and the dry skeletons of some ancient blasted pines on the opposite shore. There was little light now in the tent, ex-

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cepting the glow coming from cracks in the small stove and its rusty pipe, that had both fared very badly in the fire. At last the child accepted the blanket gratefully, but first she said another prayer, kneeling beside the body of her mother.

"Alone in the great cold we will have to leave her," she said, "and go to my father. Between the two my heart is torn."

Ahteck devoutly hoped that she might find the man still living, but he had great fears. As soon as the child was soundly asleep, and notwithstanding his own fatigue, he made ready to dispose of that which was left of the poor thing that had been borne down to the earth in the eternal struggle against cold and hunger which every wanderer over the face of the great North is constantly obliged to wage.

First he wrapped it in its clothing and the torn blankets. Then, at a good distance away from the camp, he made a large fire, that he might see well, and built a high scaffold such as are used for caches, by tying cut saplings in the crotches of trees and placing strong branches across. These were kept in place by more saplings anchored with large stones. After this was done he re-

turned to the camp and noiselessly took up the load, bearing it in his arms to the scaffold, upon which he placed it, covering the body with many boughs of balsam which he also weighted down.

When he had finished he went back to the tent and awoke Mititesh from her sound sleep, and made her eat again. Just a few mouthfuls, that her strength might return soon. Then he tucked her again under the heavy blankets. At last he stretched himself on the ground beside her but remained awake a long time, because the child occasionally muttered in her sleep and he feared that she might be in pain. But after a time she turned and confidingly nestled her head against Ahteck's great breast, so that after a while both slept, deeply, forgetting for some hours all that had gone before.

The great lad was the first to open his eyes, for Mititesh had brushed her hand lightly over his face, as if, in her slumber, she had sought to find one of her beloved ones. Then an immense feeling of pity welled up in the young man's heart for this child who was so soon to be abandoned of men as he was abandoned of God. He resolved to care for her, not owing to any thought on his

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part that an action of kindness might bring some measure of forgiveness and mitigation of his sins, but simply because of a desire to lighten the curse from her life since she was too young and frail to bear great burdens all alone.

Very soon after he had awakened he rose, quietly, while the little one still slept. He would leave Jean's woman there upon the scaffold until such time as he might return and soften the ground with fire, that she might be properly buried.

He gathered up the very few things that might be of use to Mititesh, which had been saved from destruction, and placed them in his pack. Then, as soon as he had made the tea and fried some big pancakes, he awakened her and they said prayers, after which they broke their fast.

Mititesh was exceedingly hungry. Owing to Ahtech's precaution she had been untroubled with cramps or nausea, such as affects people who eat too greedily after having starved. She was already looking much better than on the previous day and Ahtech, as soon as they had eaten, took her by the hand and led her to the scaffold, where they prayed again, a long time.

"Now," said Ahtech, as they finally returned,

"it is time to leave for my camp, where thy father waits for thee. I have been wondering whether his line of traps might still be worked. It is far from ours and he is too ill to come down for a very long time, I fear. But the traps themselves must at least be taken up and saved for thee. It may be that I will return in a few days and go over it, and if I find any fur it will belong to thee also. Now tell me all thou knowest about the line."

"I have gone over a small part of it, very often," she said, "for my help has been badly needed during the last months. I was very sad because I was not stronger and better able to work."

"Where does it begin?" asked the young man.

"We start over there," she pointed. "Near the crooked birches on the other side of the river. It goes on till it reaches the small brook and follows it into the hills, passing through the great notch yonder, where the mountains show blue before the snow comes. Then it goes down into a valley, but I have not been as far as that. It is all well blazed. In the valley there is a chain of ponds, and in some years my father has killed caribou

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near them. Farther on one comes to a lake that is very full of pike and *doré*. The line keeps along the shore of the lake, to the outlet, which is south. There, my father told me, is a small shack he built long ago, a good place to rest in the night."

"That is good," said Ahtech. "I understand. It will be very easy to follow. And how goes the rest of the line?"

"My father has told me. Wait a moment."

She stopped, thinking deeply, to make very sure of her memory.

"I remember now," she continued. "To the west is an old line where the blazes were made many years ago, but the ground was not good, therefore it must not be followed, because later my father made a new one, keeping farther south. The river is to be followed from the outlet until there is a great fall, and then the line goes away from the water, passing east over a little mountain of birches and aspens. It is a good place for marten. After a half a day's travel one reaches a crooked lake with red trout, and its waters come down into this river, three miles below, where the great pine that was torn by lightning stands be-

hind the high rocks. But thou knowest the place."

Ahtech nodded. He had been listening very carefully and watching the child, who from time to time drew some sort of a map on the snow, with the singular ability of Indians to remember and describe large areas of land and water. He had asked a few questions, and now was perfectly familiar with fifty miles of country he had never visited. It is a power bred by need into the bone of his race. He could never forget the indications and would always be able to follow the line as if he had laid it out himself. He knew that all the traps and the turnings would be marked by special blazes. It was all perfectly clear to him.

"It is well," he said. "The line makes a great circle. Now we must make a start. I think that by working hard perhaps both lines might be tended later on. I shall have to speak to Paul. It will be very difficult."

"But my father," said the child. "He can work after he gets better. Always he says that he will very soon be well."

Ahtech hung his head, without answering, be-

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ing but a poor hand at deception, and little Mititesh looked up anxiously at him.

"Is his sickness too bad?" she asked, with quivering lips. "Dost thou think he will not be able to hunt again this winter? He was so sure he would soon be better. It may be that good food and the moose meat may bring back the strength he has lost!"

But Ahtech still forbore to answer, and the child rose to her feet, quickly.

"We must go," she said, eagerly. "Let us start at once! Oh! I am very strong with food now and able to walk very fast!"

The brave little thing looked up at him, feverishly anxious to start. She was so thin and weak-looking that it seemed as if a breath of wind could have blown her to the ground, but the indomitable courage of her ancestors was renewed within her and the long trip held no terror for her. Her father was waiting, he needed her, perhaps the touch of her hand might soothe him, or the sound of her voice comfort him. The splendid woman she was destined to be showed in the child. Before Ahtech's gigantic form she looked small indeed. But she was already thirteen and

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of a breed that ripens fast. It would take but a few years before she would blossom out into womanhood, though to the big lad she was but a tiny waif of tender years and still the little one who had been so friendly in the first days of his coming to Pointe Bleue, when her father had befriended him. She had sat on his knees then, and a deep affection had begun between the two, that was never to die out. On the child's part it was the feeling of a little one for a big kind brother, for a youth whose kindly nature appealed to her, and who realized the hardships of her life, during which she had for a long time done more than her share, owing to the weakness of the parents. Ahteck, however, was attracted to her only as the very lonely man is attracted by the presence of one who may divert somber thoughts, like the prisoner who learned to love a tiny plant growing between the stones of his cell.

"It is well," said the young man. "We will start now and go as far as we can this day."

## CHAPTER XII

### THE LIGHT BURDEN

It took but a few minutes to get ready before leaving the camp of starvation and disaster, which, as is the custom whenever fate has dealt harshly with any dwellers in the far places of the wilderness, would never again be the abode of Indians, so strong are old superstitions. The ragged tent whose rents Mititesh had sought to cover with bark was left standing, gradually to rot away and fall to pieces. The peeled sapling with branches cut short, upon which Jean Caron had stuck the skulls of bears and otters and other animals, was the only thing that would mark the site of the camp for a long while. Originally the hunters did this thing because the heads left to bleach in the sun and rain were deemed to occupy a place of honor that satisfied the restless spirits of the departed animals and prevented them from warning others still living against the wiles of the trappers. Now that the Indians of that region are all

Christians, and taken to task for such beliefs and heathenish customs, they are apt to continue this one. But if asked about the matter they strenuously deny having any superstitious ideas and assert that the sapling and its strange fruit merely serve to show the prowess of the hunters.

For some time Mititesh walked behind Ahteck, in his footsteps which, however, soon proved far too long for her shorter stride. She was of fair height for her years, but a tiny thing by the side of the young man. While she still showed marks of childhood in some respects she looked old, being so wan and thin. Underfed for a long time and driven beyond her strength, she was but a poor stray thing for the winds of heaven to play with, to toss about and to abandon, like the sere leaves that strew the earth at the time when the wind-gods bestir themselves at the coming of winter.

Before he had gone very far, however, Ahteck turned and looked back. He could no longer hear the slight crunching tread of her little snowshoes behind him and saw that she was already some distance away, plodding on bravely but utterly unable to keep up with him, although he had gone very slowly, as it appeared to him.

Then, for some time, he walked still more leisurely, having known all the while that he would have to carry her. But the way was long and hard and he knew that he must let her go as far as she could without tiring her too much. Great as was his own strength he realized that it must be husbanded. It was a thing of value, like food, or even like the money of the white men, to be used sparingly in order to make it go as far as possible. He allowed her to come up to him again, and spoke words of encouragement, but soon she dropped behind and he stopped, throwing off his pack. They had gone about a mile.

Once more Mititesh reached him. She appeared to be quite exhausted, but had kept on with indomitable courage.

"I am not as strong as I thought," she acknowledged, sorrowfully, her breath coming very fast. "I think the long hunger must have changed me, for we have come but a little way. But thou canst leave me a little food and a blanket, and go on. A few matches I will also need, for the night. I will follow as soon as I can. Have no fear that I will not reach thy camp. I will follow thy tracks."

Ahtech smiled, admiring the child's wonderful pluck. He knew that she was quite well aware that this thing she proposed was well-nigh a certainty of her dying alone, on the trail, unable to go on. Yet she was willing to hang upon such a slender thread of chance.

The young man shook his head.

"We are going to camp together," he said. "We are old friends that must not part so easily. For a time I will carry thee now."

She had dropped on the snow, her thin legs shaking with weariness, her breath heaving with exertion. Ahtech lengthened the rawhide thongs of his tump-line, allowing his pack to fall lower down on his back. Then he lifted Mititesh upon it so that she sat upon the bundle with her legs passing under his armpits and her mitten hands resting upon his shoulders.

The whole thing was done in a very few minutes, and he rose easily with his load and resumed his long effective strides.

"I fear I am very heavy," said Mititesh, much concerned.

He laughed one of his rare laughs, that were very soft.

"Thou art indeed terribly heavy, little Miti-tesh," he said. "Full as heavy as a tiny *maskoush*, a small cub of bear born a few months only. Take a good hold of my shoulders, or about my neck. The going is not bad now and I must hurry on."

It gave him pleasure to feel the pressure of her small hands, to have, at times, the warm breath blowing against his cheek. The load was small indeed compared with the tremendous burdens he was accustomed to carry over the portages, and yet he felt it, in the bad places where the snow was soft or the ground very rough, and realized that later on, towards the end of the day, it would bear down shrewdly upon him and slow his gait. This did not trouble him. He simply thought it his duty to take the child as fast as he could to her father. He was doing his best and that was enough.

After he had gone on steadily for some miles he felt his charge growing somewhat unsteady on his back. The pressure of the little hands had relaxed. When he spoke to her, softly, the child did not answer, but her quiet breathing reassured him. He put one of his hands up to his neck and

caught hers, gently, so that she might not drop off during her sleep. Her head had fallen upon the nape of his neck and he was glad that she could rest.

Thereupon he toiled on, powerfully, ceaselessly, never taking the slightest rest, while a new sense that was a pleasant one and comforting stole over him, gradually. It was as if he had been a child leading a dreary life, who had found something to pet and care for, as little ones of the woodland sometimes adopt a tiny cub of bear or fox. It seemed, in some hazy way, as if his hard life were leaving a deep groove in which it had run all too long—as if a new element had entered it, that gave him courage and greater strength. The load was resting easily upon him, and the full pride of his early manhood appeared to carry him along, swiftly and with a power that was new to him so that he bucked the tangles of alders, and crunched over the hummocky places of swamps where the leaves of dead bracken and fern sometimes showed through the snow, carpeting the ground whose oozing black muck was frozen now and crackled under his feet. His great length of limb permitted him to step over prostrate trunks

of good size, with never a moment's hesitation, with no faltering, and he went on like some machine built by the ingenuity of man, that keeps on going until the fuel is exhausted.

That little hand he was holding was but a very slender thing, even in the thick mitten of muskrat fur, and yet he derived a sense of well-being from its touch, akin to that of a child deprived of companions that has found some living thing it may take to its breast, to pet and cherish.

He continued to walk on rapidly until noon, when the sun of midwinter, still very low in the sky, had reached the most southerly point of its journey. He felt satisfied, knowing that he was making good progress. The cold was growing more and more intense, however, for the sky had become clear and bright. It was then that Miti-tesh suddenly awoke.

"I think I fell asleep," she said, rubbing her eyes. "At first my feet were very cold and gave me some pain, but now I feel nothing. Have we gone far?"

But he did not answer her question, feeling much disturbed, and stopped immediately, putting the girl down on the ground and throwing off his

pack, hurriedly. At once he lighted a fire, for the place offered the shelter of large cliffs rising sheer by the side of the river which protected them from the biting wind.

"Now take off thy shoepacks," he said, "and also thy stockings. Wait, sit down on the pack, I will help thee. Have a care and do not pull hard."

He kneeled in front of her, reproaching himself bitterly. He should have remembered that her feet would be a little moist from the walking, and, like a fool, he had neglected to see to this and had taken her up on his back without attending to a most important matter. He had no doubt that her feet had become badly chilled and, by this time, might be severely frost-bitten.

He loosened his pack and pulled out a pair of heavy socks made of rabbit skin and, as soon as the child's feet were bare, rubbed them vigorously with the soft fur. Upon the toes there were a few white spots that worried him a good deal. After the rubbing was over, when the feet tingled and hurt again, he hastily put more wood on the fire, melted icicles in the kettle to make tea, and then got under the blankets he had placed over

Mititesh, after opening his *capot* and the two heavy shirts he wore, and put the still icy feet upon his warm bare breast, while she protested strenuously that she was all right. At a word from him, however, she kept still and, gratefully, felt the returning heat. It was as if a little of the abundant store of the man's life had gone out to her to make her strong again, as some give of their blood-stream to those who are fainting and pulseless from much bleeding. The color returned to her dusky cheeks, that had become very gray.

They remained there for a long time, perhaps an hour, during which they ate again. Ahteck was disturbed over the idea that perhaps he was bringing ill-chance to the child. After a time he looked again at the small shapely feet, that had never known other covering than soft moccasins or shoe-packs, and saw that the white spots had entirely disappeared and that he had probably been just in time. There were no suspicious welts, no undue redness of the skin. Then he warmed her stockings by the fire, and over them drew on the big fur socks and a pair of soft buck-skin moccasins. These had been made for him

and he could not help smiling while, for the first time, the girl's face also showed slight merriment.

While they ate, sitting near the fire that was sending up sparks in the frosty air, Mititesh was looking at Ahtech, and a deepening wonder arose in her, because all this was just like one of the legends of the olden time in which the son of the Northwest Wind and of Wenonah, in the tales still known to most of the Indians of the Great North, plays all manners of wonderful pranks. He was a marvelously big man, not at all like others, evidently endowed with strange gifts, who turned up suddenly in the nick of time, as Nana-booshoo did in the stories of her people. Her short life had been a very hard one, and she scarcely understood how it had come about that she was now receiving such gentle care. Indeed she had known affection, for Indians are very good to their children, but her parents, through stress of illness, had depended on her to the limit of her slender forces. And now Ahtech was lifting her to his great back, after feeding her and chafing the feet he had warmed on his great breast. It was very wonderful!

Long association with Pete McLeod, a man of exceeding gentleness of character, and the two children he had helped to care for, had doubtless had a considerable influence upon the lad Ahteck, yet it is also probable that some of the refinement and kindness of his manner had been born in him, derived from the loving woman who had been his mother. He had always impressed the child Mititesh greatly, and, in her simple mind, she accepted with no little wonder the mystery of his kindness to her.

Soon they were again on their way. Ahteck, before the stop, had already walked steadily for five hours, going very fast in spite of his load. But this he had scarcely felt, and when he started again he knew that he would be able to keep on, untiringly, until the darkness would compel him to stop. People of cities and of the country of clear roads and paths are apt to think in terms of three miles an hour for easy going. In the trackless wilderness of forests covering hill and dale, of woods tangled with undergrowth which merge into swamps with their barriers of alders, a rate of a couple of miles an hour is tremendous travel for a day's work, when a man merely carries a

gun. Ahtech, in spite of his burden, did all of this. Very often he asked Mititesh if her feet were warm, and warned her against falling asleep again, but she always assured him that they were all right and he would keep on plodding, silently. The downward tracks had been covered by the new snow but he continued by the same road, unerringly, recognizing trees and snow-capped rocks and fallen trunks, with the marvelous instinctive memory of the wilderness dweller, so that he did not have to pick out his way again.

It was an extraordinary progress, during which he passed swiftly over bad going, drove hard against obstructions, avoided tangled thickets of leafless branches and vines spread before him like a net, and, when he happened to take to the surface of the river, watched carefully for dangerous spots.

After four more hours of going the sun had touched the serrated edge of the big woods in the west with flaming hues, casting long tinted shadows over the snow, and he was looking for a place in which to camp for the night. He had already passed the spot where, on the downward journey, he had been obliged to stop and await the morn-

ing. He was glad that a short march begun at early sunrise would take him to the camp early in the next day.

Mititesh was very eager to help him with his preparations, but he bade her sit by the fire and warm herself. After food they had the evening prayer and immediately afterwards stretched themselves out to sleep. The sky was entirely clear again and, in the fierce cold, the stars appeared to vibrate, to dance in the sky as if they also had felt the chill of the world and could not keep still. Further to the south, at the big Shallow Lake, as the Indians call St. John, the temperature on that night was well below forty. They were compelled to sleep with their faces under the blankets, to avoid freezing them, even close to the big fire which Ahteck often arose to replenish. In the stillness of the night great trees were cracking and splitting, with detonations like the firing of guns, and the ice on the river near by groaned with the heaving of the flood enclosed within tremendous shackles.

## CHAPTER XIII

### JEAN CARON THROWS OFF HIS RESPONSIBILITIES

It was still frightfully cold when Ahtech rose, carefully lest he should awaken the child; he had not slept very much owing to the necessity of keeping the fire going. Its flame, as he piled on more wood, was reflected upon the wall of a great perpendicular rock at the foot of which they had made their camp. Mititesh continued to sleep, with her head under the blankets, and the man took the trouble to go at some distance to chop more wood so that the sound of his ax-strokes might not awaken her. He took some flaming brands from the big fire and built a smaller one for cooking, near at hand.

It was only when the water was boiling in the kettle that she awoke, rubbing her eyes, and heard the fat sputtering in the pan. Timidly she called to him, bidding him good morning. It irked her

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a little to see that he was doing what should have been the woman's work, and instantly she leaped to her feet.

They were not very far from the river's edge. Hardly a hundred paces above them there was a fall over which white water, in a cloud of vapor, was roaring before it became engulfed beneath a vast bed of ice. The spray had crystallized upon the bare limbs and twigs of trees and bushes that bent under a heavy load of gems scintillating in the light of the rising sun. Ahteck was still cutting wood, with cautious strokes. By the time they sat down on the blankets, to eat, they were well ready for the huge pancakes fried in fat and several cups of tea, black and bitter.

An abundance of good food had already wrought a great change in the child Mititesh. She was active now and full of life; the earthy color of her cheeks had disappeared while beneath her dusky skin there was a pink glow. As soon as they had ended their meal she bestirred herself, cleaning the frying pan by boiling water in it, and washed out the little wide-bottomed teakettle and the cups, making herself useful. After this, as Ahteck finished rolling up and packing the

blankets, she tied on the snowshoes he had carried for her.

"Now I will not be carried any more," she informed him. "I am very strong. How far is it to thy camp?"

"A little more than two hours of walking," he answered, "but it will be better that I should carry thee."

Mititesh, however, shook her head.

"I am surely not a *ouash*, a little baby to be carried on its mother's back," she insisted. "The great hunger is forgotten now and I am well rested."

"I have been thinking that from now on, perhaps, thou wouldst be my *ouash*," said Ahteck, incautiously, whereupon the child's eyes filled at once with tears.

"Nikaui, my poor mother, she is gone now, and her body there among the big trees is shaken by the wind, waiting to sleep quietly in the ground," she answered, sadly. "And perhaps thou thinkest my father will go to seek her. If it should be so then I will be thy *ouash*, if thou wilt take me, because there is no one else in the world that will want me."

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He patted her shoulder, gently, nodding assent, and they took up their journey. The child trotted easily beside him now, while he took care to shorten his stride a little. Several times he asked if he might carry her, but always she shook her head and followed him, breathing easily and going on without fatigue. She was strong and well developed, and the wondrous recuperative power of her youth seemed to have already blotted out the effects of hunger and over-exertion.

It was not very long before they reached the young men's permanent camp. From a distance they saw white smoke curling above the roof from the stove-pipe. It looked like an oasis in the desert of snow and ice.

Paul came out upon the door-sill.

"Good morning, Mititesh!" he cried. "A welcome to thee, little one. Ahteck, luck has come to me, for I have caught that thief of a *carcajou* and his hide is stretching. A fine one he was. The *maudit* will no longer rob my traps. A robber he was and the son of robbers. But I am keeping you out. Come in, I have a good fire and it is warm, and there is bread made this morning, and I will fry meat. Come in, little Mititesh!"

The girl had been looking at him, anxiously, for during the whole journey she had feared bad news. She entered the shack, hurriedly. From the roof-beam hung the frame bearing the pelt of the wolverine. Many others were also drying there.

At the other side of the small stove, in a rough bunk built of ax-hewn planks against the wall of logs, and lying under a heavy blanket, Jean Caron had risen on one elbow. He had been listening intently, as soon as he had heard the voices outside. Now he was watching, eagerly, anxiously.

The man's eyes brightened when his child Mititesh appeared, but they remained fixed upon the door. When the men entered, however, carefully closing it, he understood and fell back in the bunk, breathing fast. There was no need to tell him that the mother had been left behind, in her last long sleep, and that he would never see her again. A bad fit of coughing came on and racked his chest. He made the sign of the cross and lay still, accepting the terrible blow with the patience and resignation of his people.

Mititesh had hurried to him and sat near, on a rough bench. She took his thin hand in her own, dry-eyed, in silence, quite overwhelmed by the

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knowledge, that had come to her quite suddenly, that a further change in her life must take place. Another payment of the heavy toll exacted by the great North upon its people was being made. She had hoped, during the journey, that some of the strength that was returning to her own limbs would also come back to her father; that he would be better, as he had always promised he would.

But soon the other men were at work, skinning, stretching pelts, busily engaged with various duties, for the passing away of one man cannot be permitted to delay the toil of others. The only difference was that Paul forbore to hum or whistle some merry tune.

After a long time Jean Caron closed his eyes and appeared to sleep. Then Mititesh arose and looked about her. From her earliest childhood she had always labored to help. She did not feel tired now, and began to look over the garments that hung from pegs in the walls, and mended some rents in them. Also she darned holes in huge socks and scrubbed the meager outfit of pots and pans till they shone again, using ashes from the stove. But constantly she interrupted her work to attend to the wants of the sick man, to

whom she ministered with loving patience during the day, and even in the long night that finally came on.

But the next day, very early, as the last stars were going out, a long time before the rising of the sun, Ah-teck spoke.

"We will have to go," he said. "Thou knowest that the traps must be looked over. It will take me two days. Paul also is going, but another way. If I can do so I will return to-morrow night, but the journey is long. I cannot tell. Then on the next day I will turn to the south again, I think, and go to look over your line. It will take all of four days. Here is where the tea is kept, but thou knowest. Here is also the flour and the salt, and there is fat melted in this kettle. Thou knowest where the sugar is. There is not very much but take of it according to thy needs, for thy father says the sugared water helps his cough."

The two young men went over to the sick man's bunk and pressed his hand, gently. After this they stepped out of the shack and began to tie on their snowshoes, with the utmost care. Miti-tesh watched them from the door sill, looking wist-

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fully at their preparations. Their guns were in their hands and their packs upon their backs, and they were about to start when Ahteck, looking at her, saw the sad little face. He took a step towards her, remembering the younger children of his mother, and, bending down, gave her a kiss.

"It is the white man's way of departing," he said.

"It is good," she answered in a low voice.

"I would stay with thee if I could," he told her, "but thou knowest I cannot. I will return as soon as I am able."

Indeed she knew it well. During all her life she had waited. The women were always waiting and hoping, and very often all their hopes were in vain. This waiting was the very hardest part of a woman's work, and now her share of it would be very great. She dreaded the long time that must elapse before Ahteck's return, and—and the evil things that might happen before he could come back—things over which one could have no control. But of course she would wait, patiently, doggedly, long-sufferingly, with the marvelous endurance of her sex, with the firm trustfulness of

her childhood, with the brave calmness of her race, and would pray.

After the men had finally disappeared in the long shadows cast by the rising sun the short hours of daylight dragged themselves along, very slowly. By four o'clock it was nearly dark and it had begun to snow again, but the terrible cold had somewhat abated.

There was a small provision of candles, but Mititesh knew that they were very valuable things, always to be used sparingly. From time to time she opened the door of the little stove, to throw in another stick of wood, and for some moments a red glow would light up the shack, casting strange shadows of hanging pelts upon the walls, distorting things into uncanny forms.

It was indeed a weird night that Mititesh spent, one that would surely have tried beyond the breaking point the vital forces of a child nurtured under less harsh surroundings. But the scratching of wood mice did not affect her at all, nor the ululations of an owl that stationed itself upon a tree near at hand. She was not startled by a sudden shrill cry that may have been uttered by a hare pounced upon, as he lay in the warm form he

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had trodden down under frost-covered bushes, by the snowy-feathered robber of the night. These were all familiar things, to which she had long been inured. That which tried her soul was the constantly recurring cough of her father, his quiet though patient complaints, his efforts, in the darkness, to mutter a part of the prayers for the dead, heard many times in the little church on the hill at Pointe Bleue. It was for the soul of his wife that he was praying, but to the child it seemed as if he was imploring for the safety of his own, that was about to start for the long journey, and it harrowed her little mind. Through the blackness of the long hours she scarcely slept at all, attending to all his wants. From time to time he stirred, restlessly, calling often for the hot sugared water or asking for the strong tea he longed for exceedingly, as all Indians do, whether hale or ill.

She kept the little kettle simmering upon the stove, adding more water as the need arose, for the Indian wants his tea boiled that the last atom of virtue may be extracted from his scanty store of leaves. The awful, black stuff, bitter as gall, seemed to relieve his cough for some minutes at a

time. Once there was a blessed rest, when he fell asleep for about an hour, holding one of her little hands until the clammy coldness gradually chilled her so that at last her teeth were chattering.

The new day came, and went by, and things were not quite so bad, because she was able to find things to do, and busy fingers, at intervals, lessened the keenness of the thoughts that assailed her. Also there was a bare chance that Ahteck would return. He had promised to do his best. It would be so good to have him in the shack, during another night, even if he slept through it. His mere presence would strengthen her. It was something to hope for. The man never realized that for some years the child had looked upon him as a sort of brother, as one greater than all others not only in stature but also in kindness. To her he was the man who had saved her, who had given her little presents, who had at times brightened the gloom of her little life, while to him she had only been a child, pretty and gentle, to whom any one would have been glad to show friendship and kindliness.

During the afternoon she went out for another

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provision of the wood which the trappers had accumulated in an immense pile near the shack, and returned to find that, for the first time, her father was sitting up on the bunk. She thought that he was breathing more easily, and doubtless the deep red spots over his cheek-bones gave him a deceptive look of health that somewhat misled her. He had hardly spoken more than a few words at a time since he had realized that his wife was no more, but now he looked better and spoke at some length.

"It has been a very bad year, little Mititesh," he said. "And now is the end of the year. Thy mother has gone from us. She sleeps in the great wood by the river, and it is well, for these two men will bury her in good time. Soon I will also sleep the long sleep, because this is the end of things for me. Now remember always that Ahtech is a good man. Paul is also a very good man, but Ahtech is wiser and much stronger. Do thou whatever Ahtech says. At the breaking up of the ice he will take thee back to Pointe Bleue. There the good sisters will take care of thee in the big house that is at Roberval, and the fathers also, as they do for the children of those who die too soon,

and of the parents that are left behind in the great woods. They are good people."

Mititesh nodded a sorrowful assent; she could not find any words then.

"My gun has been saved," he continued. "It is worth but very little. The trapping line belongs to thee, with all the traps that are out on it. That is all, but for the little house at Pointe Bleue. All other things are gone, but the canoe that is cached in the woods. It is old. I was thinking to make a new one, but it will never be."

There was an interval of silence. The child was weeping silently.

"I am very weary now," he resumed. "It is a sign that the end is near. I love thee much, little Mititesh. This name was given thee because, on the day of thy birth, I found a fine pearl in the mussels of the Aleck River. Thou art very young to be left alone so soon, and I am sad because I cannot bring thee back to Pointe Bleue myself, in safety, as in other years. I am sorry to leave thee, but big Ahtech of Grand Lac will take care of thee, for he has made me a promise."

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After this, having settled all matters, Jean Caron lay down again, quietly, for he had given up the struggle, and when an Indian does this his life remains but a short time in his body. There was a curious look of contentment upon his thin face, as if all his cares had suddenly been swept away. He had always done his best and, his task once finished, he could peacefully await the end. The call of another world had sounded in his ears, and he was responding.

With the going down of the sun the snow stopped falling. The men, however, had not come, and Mititesh began to resign herself to the drear misery of another long and weary night. She began to cook herself a little supper, listening keenly all the time and often turning to look at her father. It was when she had gone down on her knees, and was finishing her evening prayer, that she arose excitedly. She distinctly heard a voice in the distance.

It was Paul Barotte, the ever-cheerful one, within whose veins a little French blood probably ran. He was plodding home in the beginning dusk and singing:

"Nous v'là partis pour le Grand Nord  
Les canots ont une bonne charge  
Les voyageurs sont tous à bord  
Pousse les gars, pousse bien au large!"

In a few moments he arrived and threw his heavy pack upon the floor.

"*Bonne chance!*!" he exclaimed. "I have some good pelts. The new year is beginning well. It may be that good luck has come with thee, little one!"

He lighted a candle and looked at the sick man.

"It seems to me that he is better," he said, in a lowered voice. "See how quietly he is sleeping now."

But little Mititesh shook her head and whispered.

"He no longer says he is getting better. His sleep is very quiet now, but I fear it is the last. He did not awake at thy coming!"

She began at once to prepare more food for Paul, who was pulling off his shoepacks and changing his stockings. There was smoked moose-meat and great pancakes, which he wolfed down with his scalding tea.

And then, an hour later, Ahteck also arrived,

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very weary but smiling, for he also had found some good fur in his traps.

"It has been a good day's work," he said. "The fisher is a fine pelt and the pair of martens is good. I have been walking very fast. It has been hard, in the last two hours, in the darkness with the new snow."

The girl knew as well as if he had carefully explained everything that he must have toiled terribly to reach camp that night. She wondered that the two men had not lost their way in the dark, in which no marks of trail could be seen. Most other men would have camped at night-fall, wherever they chanced to find themselves. She knew that each of them had traveled some fifty miles in the two days, bearing packs, stopping often to clear drifted snow from traps, to take out fur, to replace the bait stolen by the smaller rodents of the woods, to set the springs again. Each time they had lifted the packs again to their backs and hurried on, noting tracks, watchful of everything, for it was always possible that big game might be ahead, that would mean meat and the saving of provisions. She knew that they had done this chiefly for her sake, quietly, naturally,

out of the simple goodness of their hearts, to spare her the desolation of another lonely night.

"You are very good," she said, gratefully.  
"Indeed it was kind of you to hasten back."

The two young men smiled quietly at her and Ahteck, after looking at Jean Caron and shaking his head, in turn began to eat much food, such as his great body needed.

They were soon ready to throw themselves upon their rough beds, which the hunters had made for themselves on the floor. Ahteck was about to blow out the candle, of which they had made extravagant use, when they were all startled by a sudden silence. The harsh, strident breathing of Jean Caron had ceased. It was poignant and profound. The man had peacefully breathed his last and the men instinctively took off their *tuques*.

Then they all knelt down in the little cabin of rough logs chinked with moss and clay from the river banks and repeated, as best they could, such fragments as they remembered of the prayers for the dead.

After a long time they rose and Ahteck lighted three candles which he placed at the head of the still form, and the sobbing child was again grate-

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ful. She knew that he was giving most liberally out of the small store that was left and which should have served to light up some moments of the endless dark evenings.

Long after the two men had risen Mititesh continued to remain upon her knees, while the men watched her, silently, afraid to intrude upon her sorrow. Then she sank down on the floor, in a sort of collapse, as though over-wearied and wrought beyond her strength.

Ahteck picked her up in his arms, a poor little flaccid thing, and placed her on his knees while he sat before the stove, her head resting in the hollow of his arm, her long tresses falling to the floor. Then she began to breathe quietly, while the tears kept coming to her eyes, serving to lessen the pain that was in her heart, and Ahteck caressed her face, gently, with his big rough paw, his great limbs looking strangely employed in this nursing of the little waif.

Finally she fell asleep, comforted, with his strong arms about her, protecting, supporting her, and for a long time he remained thus, still as a statue of bronze, fearing to move lest he should disturb her. Paul had fallen asleep while sitting

at their small rough-hewn table, and was snoring peacefully, his head resting upon his arms.

The wood-mice squeaked as they ran beneath the flooring or came out, scampering and looking for crumbs. The wind rose, outside, causing ice-laden branches to crackle and break, and the man awake tortured his soul again with the thought that this child was perhaps suffering through the agency of evil things that hovered over him and all he might ever care for.

## CHAPTER XIV

### A TREASURE OF THE WILDS

At least an hour must have elapsed before Ahteck placed Mititesh on a bunk, without awakening her. (On the previous night she had hardly slept at all, and now her weariness had overcome her.) He placed her upon soft pelts that, in a great city, would have made too costly a bed for any but the very richest, and covered her with blankets. After this he saw that the stove was replenished and drew his tuque over his ears and his heavy mitts over his hands. Then he opened the door very softly. Once outside he saw great clouds scurrying across the sky, pushed by a strong wind that was blowing with bitter shrewdness. The crusted snow crackled under his feet as he walked off along the side of the little river.

A few score yards away from the camp, among the trees, he repeated the preparations for the disposal of the dead, building another scaffold upon which to place the body until they could dig down

into the reluctant earth whose bosom was now locked by the frost. After he had worked for a little more than an hour he went back to the log cabin and awakened Paul, who lifted his head from the table and rubbed his eyes. But at once he understood what was needed. Together they prepared that which was left of Jean Caron and bore it away to its place of temporary rest.

The child was still sleeping soundly when they came back and threw themselves upon their couches on the floor, tired and heavy-eyed with sleep. The slumbering Mititesh seemed to be making up for the long hunger, for the weeks of overwork during which she had done nearly a man's toil, and, notwithstanding the keenness of the blow she had received, nature was reviving her and bringing strength renewed.

She did not awaken until it was fairly late in the morning. The light of day was already beginning to stream through a few cracks in the rough door. A glance at the other bunk at once apprised her of what had been done. The three little candles had burned down to the bottom of the tin plate on which they had been placed, for safety. She looked quite rested now, and her

quiet resignation showed that, with the power of her youth, she was overcoming the forces that had been arrayed against her. At first she was seized with the fear that she had again been left alone, that the two men had already departed for their hunting grounds, that she would not be able to stretch her hands out to them in gratitude. But in a moment she heard lowered voices outside and leaped out of the bunk. A moment later she pushed the door open.

"*Quey, quey,*" she greeted them.

They repeated the Montagnais words of greeting, smiling at her and asking how she felt.

"Pull down thy cap lest thy little ears freeze off, Mititesh," Paul admonished her. She complied at once.

Among the Indians it is only the forces of nature that are ever harsh to children. Never are they beaten, scarcely ever scolded. Greater latitude is always allowed them than would be the case with the young of white people, and yet scarcely ever do they become annoying or impudent. Among these people there is still a leaven of old superstitions, notions of the centuries gone by, according to which the little ones carried the

souls of the departed of their families. In this way the punishment of a child might have meant irreverence to the spirit of the dead. It is to be noted that such ideas could never have arisen in the minds of people who were not fundamentally gentle and kind, for the nature of all men is reflected in the beauty or the harshness of their beliefs. The traditions and the legends may go by the board but the central motive remains. In their treatment of Mititesh the two men simply followed ancient custom. But the girl had been alone, most of her life, with two ailing people a great part of whose care had devolved upon her. The change that had taken place was like that from freezing cold to pleasant warmth, from thirst and hunger to cravings satisfied. It was these two men who were bringing it all about, so that her little heart went out to them, and especially to the young giant who had carried her on his back through the wilderness, as the demi-god Nanabooshoo was said to have carried other children that had strayed afar.

She expected to see them leave at once, but through some tacit understanding the men remained in camp all that day. The child had

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found the tracks leading down the bank of the stream. A number of times she wandered down there, alone, and said prayers while she knelt down on the dry snow. Ah-teck and Paul, however, were trying to lose no time. They did some skinning and stretching of pelts, and cut more wood and piled new snow at the foot of the shack to keep it warm. But the next day, by waning starlight, after a few words with his friend, Ah-teck began to make ready to leave.

"Now I am going to look over thy line of traps," he told Mititesh. "It will take all of five days, and perhaps more. Paul will have to go over our lines and will also be gone for several days. It cannot be helped. But he will return before me. Thou wilt have to stay here all alone, but there is nothing that can harm thee, as thou knowest. Do not forget to cook for thyself, and to eat well. There is food enough. Eat when the proper time comes. Also remember to say thy prayers morning and night. So now I will say good-by, for I think to reach thy old camp this evening, carrying but a small load."

Mititesh turned away from him, her head bent low, trying to conceal her face from him.

"What is it, little one?" asked Ahteck, putting his hand on her shoulder.

"It is nothing. I will stay since it is thy wish," said Mititesh, turning to him eyes upon whose lashes trembled two big tears, "I have no fear of being left alone, and yet this day will be a very lonely one. My mother I always had with me, to talk to. I am very strong now and can bear loads, big loads. I used to help my father, often carrying his pack for him."

"It is thy wish to come with me?" he asked. "But thou knowest how long and hard is the way. It is a very long journey for thee."

"I have become so very strong," she persisted, pleadingly.

"With his long legs Ahteck will kill thee with fast walking," said Paul. "Not for nothing did his parents call him the Caribou. Here thou wouldst rest and eat well, and grow fat and round till thou couldst lift a hundred pounds of flour in one hand, a big strong maiden."

But Ahteck, seeing the child's desolation, came to a quick decision.

"Make ready in haste, Mititesh, we go together," he said.

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The child gathered up a few things in a hurry and, stepping outside, tied on her snowshoes. A bit of happiness was surely throwing a ray of sunshine upon her, that warmed her heart. She was smiling now, through her tears. She seized her little tump-line and was about to take up a part of the load when Ahteck laughed.

"There is not enough for me now," he said, cheerfully. "Wait until we return with many pelts. Then thy very strong back will be bent under a great load."

She knew that he was jesting, and smiled at him again, happily, while Paul stared at him, amazed to see his somber companion in such a pleasant mood.

"At least I may take the gun," said Mititesh.

She passed the rawhide sling of the gun cover that protected his 44 over his breast, making a quaint figure as she started away with the young giant, a strangely assorted pair.

"*Ekun miam!* It is fine indeed!" laughed Paul. "See the great hunters starting. Now we shall know which is the better. *Bonne chance!*"

As with most of the Indians of Pointe Bleue their speech was apt to be a mixture of Montag-

nais and French, with rare scattering words derived from the English.

The two waved their hands back at him and went on, while he fastened his tump-line to his forehead and started in the opposite direction. Ahteck discovered very soon that Mititesh was not the same child he had brought from the camp of starvation. Allowing for her youth, the statement that she was very strong proved true. She now seemed to be indefatigable and trotted behind him, mile after mile. Her vigor had returned with the abundant food of the last few days and her lithe young body was manifesting a wealth of recuperative power.

The first day's journey was not a very long one, as they had not made a very early start and Ahteck was anxious not to try the girl too hard. But on the following day, after a long sleep in the woods, they traveled far, reaching Caron's deserted camp and starting almost immediately over the line, after a long prayer before the scaffold and the snow-covered burden it bore.

It is a sad manner of disposing of dear ones but, in the middle of winter, nothing else can be done at first. Mititesh felt as if the poor shapeless

form must still be suffering from the bitter cold and uneasy when the strong winds swayed the poles to which it was lashed. There are many who think that the Indians are an unsentimental race owing to the rather cold exterior they present to strangers. But those who have penetrated this deceptive surface, who have dwelt among them and obtained their confidence, know that in reality they are a people full of imagination and living in a world full of mysteries which they have sought to explain in legends that show a high degree of ingenious and often lofty thought. It is only after contact with the white man and his vices that they degenerate from a rather high estate to that of the lowest among the invaders of their fastnesses.

From earliest morning till nightfall they kept on following the long line, and the child showed great endurance and sometimes even proved of slight help. To the man her presence changed the character of his occupation. The prolonged toil in utter solitude had always favored his tendency to revert constantly to the awful thoughts from which his mind was seldom entirely free. But now that this little one was beside him the work

seemed more easy, the way shorter, the trend of his ideas less dark and gruesome. He noted her marvelous deftness in skinning small animals. One evening she set snares and was able to catch a couple of hares that served chiefly as bait for the traps, though the skins were carefully saved.

Ahteck thought well of the line. In former days Caron had always brought back a good lot of fur. The young man decided that it might be well to try to work it steadily, though he realized the enormous increase in the amount of toil it would entail. By this time many of the traps were covered deeply with drifted snow, which had to be cleared off, after which they were baited again. Ahteck, like all other trappers, used some wonderful stuff of penetrating odor to put upon his bait. It was a weird decoction of scent glands and other things meant to dispel the odor of man and even attract the game to the traps. Some of it he dropped on the soles of his shoepacks and upon his mitten hands.

They had gone nearly over the whole length of the long line, with a catch amounting only to two mink and a few weasels, besides a single marten, and, from the lay of the land, Ahteck knew

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that another couple of hours would bring them out upon the river again, fairly near Caron's camp. They were then traveling by the edge of a brook that was hard to follow on account of many recent windfalls, and Mititesh spoke.

"It must be very near. My father said that he had two traps set for foxes. He said he had seen many tracks near the bend of the brook. It is a very good place and in other years he caught some."

They kept on, carefully watching the blazes upon the trees, and reached a tall fir bearing a trap-mark.

At the foot of it there was a small mound, snow-covered, showing that a little hut had been built, of sticks covered with boughs of balsam making a roof. There was a narrow entrance through which any animal must enter before he could reach the bait.

Ahteck knelt down, after he had thrown off his pack, and began to scoop off the snow with his hands. It was fine and dry as sand. A few dark hairs showed and his eyes glittered, while Mititesh clasped her hands together, joyfully, and cried out:

"A black fox!"

Carefully, tenderly, they brushed off all the snow and took the beautiful thing out of the trap. It had not been dead very long and the snow had kept it from freezing very hard. This was the hope, hardly ever realized, of every trapper; the wonderful prize the possibility of which always lies before their eyes; the thing that brings startling dreams in the middle of the night; the stroke of good fortune achieved once out of many lives of terrible toil.

After they had loosened off the jaws of the trap they smoothed the wonderful fur, black as the pupil of a baby's eyes and threaded with a few silver hairs, with a dot of white at the end of the full, rounded, bushy tail. They studied it, and gloated over it, just as, in the great cities of civilized men, people become crazed over the precious marvels of art. They decided that, beyond a per-adventure, the eyes of man had never before rested on such a large, splendid, heavily furred, long haired black fox. It was a wonder much greater than all other wonders, and they could hardly believe their eyes.

They could scarcely bear to put it away in the

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pack, but after it had been tucked in, with a thousand precautions, they walked away very fast in order to return to the camp before nightfall. But of course, after they reached it, they did not stop very near the charred remains of the old hut. It may have been a touch of superstition, perhaps, but one that may hardly be cavilled at.

The cold had abated a great deal, that day. After Ahteck had arranged their shelter, and their food had been eaten in great haste, they decided to skin the animal without delay.

"It is not at all spoiled," said Ahteck. "Take thou the knife and begin. Wait, I will sharpen it a little."

"But I am afraid," said Mititesh. "It is too beautiful. It might be that my hand would shake. It would be terrible to make a hole in that beautiful hide."

Together they sat down on a great fallen log, after clearing off the snow. The darkness was coming on apace but the blazing fire before them permitted them to see and Mititesh, breathless, watched the skinning, which proceeded slowly, carefully, with all the infinite precaution demanded by such an important matter. Foxes are

not cut open but cased, like other most valuable pelts. The hide has to be peeled off through a small opening between the hind legs, much as an eel is skinned, and the operation is one that demands a good deal of skill. Ahteck often stopped to give his knife a few strokes on a tiny whetstone, and would begin again to loosen the pelt with short, careful strokes, until it was all cased and looked fit to adorn a queenly neck.

Again they spent much time in looking over the wonderful thing, the inside of which was rubbed with a little ash from the fire, and at last the great lad spoke at length.

"I am glad, little Mititesh, for now thou art rich. The debt thy father owed the Company may be paid in full, and much money will remain. I have seen some black foxes in my time, but never one like this."

"But this fox surely belongs to thee," said the child. "Thou hast saved me, and without thee it would have been left in the woods and eaten by other animals, till nothing would have been left but a few black hairs and white bones. I can never repay thee."

"The fox is thine, Mititesh," Ahteck persisted.

"Thy father set the trap and it now belongs to his child. Also the line was his. I would never take it for it would be an evil thing to do. There is no need to speak of this any more."

Mititesh rose and stood in front of him as he sat upon the log, cutting tobacco in the palm of his hand. For a moment she remained silent, looking hard at him and thinking of some way to arrange this matter. Then her eyes brightened and everything was beautifully settled in her mind. She had found a splendid solution of the problem.

"Now I will speak," she said. "It is mine, the beautiful fox, and we will sell it for much money. But thou didst find me and save me, and thou hast said I might be thy *ouash*, thy little child. But in a few years I will be a woman, and the money for the fox will be thine because thou wilt take me for thy woman and all that I have will belong to thee. Thus is everything all right now. Is it not a good idea?"

Ahteck looked at the child but made no answer. Before her glad and shining eyes his own fell to the ground. But Mititesh, greatly pleased that she had arranged things so beautifully, began to

laugh in great glee as she spread out the blankets. Soon she crawled under them and fell asleep but Ah-teck remained for a long time seated before the fire, that was sending little sparks up towards the sky. He was looking beyond them, into the darkness of future years, thinking over the great burden of a life that could never know happiness since, with that one terrible blow of his gunstock, he had shattered the ties that bound him to other men and let loose a vengeance that must overtake him some day.

## CHAPTER XV

### MITITESH FINDS A HOME

LONG before sunrise the man and the child left the camp on their long road back to Ah-teck's shack, which they reached early on the next day. They found that Paul was there, having gone over the long line twice and picked up some good pelts. After he had finished this work he had begun on a labor of kindness, a terrific undertaking when the earth is frozen for many feet in depth.

In an open piece of ground that had been quite cleared in cutting firewood for the winter, and to protect their hut from forest fires, he had cleaned off the snow over a wide space and then lighted a great fire. As soon as this was burned out and had thawed the surface for a few inches he had dug all he could with a discarded paddle that had a broken blade, also prying out rocks with a heavy pole he had sharpened at one end and hardened in the fire. He had repeated this operation a number of times, getting his hole deeper and deeper until, when the other two reached the camp, it was

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down over three feet, with the earth becoming softer. Ahteck began at once to help him, with similar clumsy tools, and the grave was soon of sufficient depth.

In this way they managed to bury Jean Caron, at whose head they placed a rough cross of heavy sticks bound together with the stringy rootlets of spruce.

In the Grand Nord, in the vast loneliness of thousands of square miles over which mere handfuls of men wander, one chances often enough to meet with such graves, of men and women and even little ones, abandoned upon the trails whereon the *voyageurs* cannot tarry long. For many years, until the breath of the world has blown away all marks of destructible things, they are remembered by wayfarers, who mention them usually in hushed voices, seldom speaking of them as they do of other sign-posts of the wilderness. When they chance to be close to a river bank or the edge of a lake canoemen are apt to remove their caps and say a word of prayer, after which they go on, perhaps taking up a song again, to pitch their camp further away.

On the next morning Ahteck spoke of the ar-

rangements to be made until the coming of warm weather should remove the icy barriers.

"From now on things must be changed a little," he said, gravely. "I will sometimes take Mititesh with me when I go over her father's line. This cannot be done very often, because it is far away and takes too much time, and I shall have to travel as fast as a man is able to. But now we must think that Paul is my partner, and since I will fail to do all of my share of the work it will be a loss to him, and he will have to work much harder. Yet this he can hardly do, for he now takes very little rest, and the beavers at felling time toil no harder. But the line of Mititesh is a very good one. A strong man can get good hunting from it. There is fur there, and for some years it has not been hunted as hard as our ground, and therefore it should be seen to. The pelts we have just brought from there will belong to Mititesh, for she and her father baited the traps. But now any other fur we may get from that country must be divided in three parts, one for each of us, so that we may not lose the good of our greater hardship. I think this will be fair. Paul, what sayest thou?"

"I think it is right, if Mititesh is willing," answered Paul, cheerfully.

"It shall be as Ahtech says," declared the child, gravely. "We have it all arranged that when I become big I shall become his woman and he will have everything that belongs to me."

"Oh! Thou shalt be his woman!" laughed Paul. "It will be a long waiting for him, for thou art but a tiny thing, a *pileshish*, a little bird scarcely fledged, while he is a great man, big as a moose. Well, I will dance at the wedding, thus!"

He began to execute some very fanciful steps on the floor of the little cabin, but Mititesh drew herself up with some dignity.

"In a few years I will be a grown woman," she said. "I will never have any other man, for my father who is dead said that he was wise, and I know that he is very good."

"That will be splendid," assented Paul. "I will wear new moccasins at the wedding, and dance until my feet go through the leather. I know that thou wilt surely grow into a nice little woman for him, and a rich one with all the money from the black fox."

But Ahtech looked persistently through the

door, gazing away over the snows that stretched upon the opposite bank of the stream, pretending to hear nothing of this talk. It was a quaint idea on the part of the child, something that should merely have amused an ordinary man and caused him to smile. But to him it merely served to bring again the obsessing ideas that he could never aspire to the happiness other men obtained and that if he ever allowed himself to be overcome by love for a woman she would doubtless serve the evil powers as a means to strike at him through the loved one.

"There is another thing to say," added Paul, after a moment's thought. "Ahteck will work very hard and so will I. We will do our best. But we must be sure that we are right. We will put all the pelts from Jean's line to one side, after this, and when we go back to Pointe Bleue we will go to Father Laroux and tell him of our agreement. If he says it is all right and fair to this child we will be pleased, and if he thinks that Mititesh is not having enough we will do whatever he says."

Ahteck nodded in assent. It was a very good idea. Every one at the reservation submitted

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knotty points to the good priest, and no one would have dreamed of disputing his decisions. But Mititesh came up to them.

"It is as you wish," she said. "I know that in the whole world there are not two other men as good as you."

From this time and on to the breaking up of the ice and the clearing of the lakes and rivers, the three worked as the beavers do when they make or repair their dams, or when the time comes to make provision of the branches of poplar for the winter's food. The sun gradually lingered in the sky, sending forth warmer rays, and the bears began to come out of their holes, still very fat, and in a few days became thin and gaunt owing to hard searching for food that was yet very scanty. The hunters trapped seven of them at this time.

They had also accumulated good packs of other fur, for the winter had been a prosperous one, in spite of fierce cold and heavy snows. They buried the mother of Mititesh, and as soon as the river began to clear they greased the stove and all the traps and hung up the wire snares in bundles. Then they gummed the canoes carefully with

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spruce gum melted in a tin can, to which they added fat so that the gum would not crack, until the tiniest hole or split in the bark was well covered over.

At last came the time of leaving and Paul sang all day long, while hard at work. With the long days and the warmer weather, and in spite of the rising clouds of mosquitoes and black flies, there was a cheeriness in the mere feeling of being alive that was like being born anew. At last, very early one morning, they entered the canoes which were now very lightly laden and would always travel with the currents. The little river was swollen with the last of the snows that were melting on the high hills, and they had to be very careful of upstanding rock-ends and snags, often holding back the canoes hard with poles or paddles. It took them only until noon to reach Jean Caron's old camp. His canoe was very old and they decided that it was not worth taking away, since it would have also been a hindrance. Hence they merely said some long prayers before leaving in earnest for the long journey to the south, that would take but a few days. Ahtech held his canoe close to the bank while Mititesh knelt in the

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bow with a fine new paddle, made just as high as herself. Ahteck had fashioned it for her of spruce, with his *couteau croche*, the crooked knife with which the men of the wilds are able to accomplish wonderful things.

The men took off their caps, made the sign of the cross and paddled away down stream, the canoes gliding fast over the heavy flood. But when they reached the first lake Aleck, instead of going to the outlet and traveling down the river, that is frightfully rough in high waters, they made a portage over some high hills and down to the Rivière Brulée.

Then the road lay through a series of small lakes abounding in pike into the Wassiemksa River and finally reached the great Peribonca, near the narrow entrance into Lake Tschotagama. Portaging over many stupendous falls, less than two days more saw them at the mouth of the river, where they chanced to find a small stern-wheeled steamer that was getting ready to start across the great lake for Roberval. As the wind was high on the lake they decided to take it. Putting their canoes on deck, after piling their bales and packs in the stern, they were soon tossing on

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the waves of Piakuamits, the Shallow Lake, as the Indians used to call Lac St. Jean.

They were still a good many miles away when they began to distinguish Pointe Bleue. Then, in the bright sunlight, amid the tender greens of pastures and the browns of recently ploughed fields, appeared the little houses and the posts of the Hudson's Bay Company and of Révillon. Above these was uplifted the spire of the little church of the Oblate Fathers, missionaries who have for many years labored among the Indians of the North. Upon the shore there is no dock, for the beach is rough and steep and badly exposed in stormy weather. When the little steamer arrived within a hundred yards of it the engine stopped and backed a turn or two, and the men put their canoes overboard, piling in the heavy fur packs. They got in, very carefully, and Mititesh followed. It was ever so interesting and pleasant to look at the shore. After the long winter it was like getting to a new country. The poplars and the birches, in soft greens, seemed to wave a welcome in the breeze. In some far-away burnt places the fire-weed threw a warm and gladdening touch upon the land. The cows,

the few horses attached to rickety buggies and carts, the people stirring on the shore, all gave an impression of a life easier and more kindly. It was wonderfully beautiful.

Upon the beach there was a small crowd, because some one had noticed that the steamer, instead of making straight for Roberval, was coming to Pointe Bleue. This could only mean that hunters were returning. Men were looking for friends, women were awaiting their men, and no one ever knew whom the boat might bring. At any rate it was an arrival from the distant hunting grounds, with furs to be inspected and commented on, new tales to be told that would only be variants from those they had been brought up on, and yet must always be absorbingly interesting.

Paul and Ahteck paddled very carefully for the waves were rather high for the canoes, and there was no little danger of capsizing. The little steamer's bell jingled, its whistle emitted a thin white cloud, in salute, and it departed along the shore towards the dock at Roberval.

They landed safely, with the help of some men who stepped into the water to steady the canoes,

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which were at once unloaded and carried up on the stony beach and left there, bottom up. It was good indeed to get back after the long winter. Ahteck saw his mother, who was running towards him, and the two children galloping madly ahead of her and shrieking, "*L'Oncle Caribou, L'Oncle Caribou!*"

Paul also had a sister to greet him, and his old mother. Dear me! But it was a great reunion! The children insisted upon being lifted up and kissed, a procedure that usually filled most of the bystanders with astonishment, for it is a custom that is being but slowly adopted by the Indians.

Then, for a moment, little Mititesh felt very lonely. There were no people hurrying down to meet her. The two men who had been so kind to her were being appropriated and made much of by others. She felt that she was like one of those old canoes stranded on the beach and beyond repair, a thing of no interest to any one. The two children who had leaped to Ahteck's arms had taken him away from her. There would be no more long journeys with him through the forests, no camp-fires in the snowy wastes, under the shelter of great rocks or upstanding timber with

branches all glistening with ice and snow. The end of those wonderful days had come.

The woman Uapukun was looking at her big son. He had put his hand on her shoulder, tenderly, but had given no other token of the great love they bore each other. The woman kept on gazing, studying him, seeking to discover whether on his face she could find any change in his spirit. But she realized that he was still under the spell —was still bending under a load tremendously great even for his massive shoulders.

Then the man stepped over to where little Miti-tesh was waiting, looking very wistful and sad.

"This is the daughter of Jean Caron," he said, gently pushing the child forward. "Her people have died in the big woods. They were very good to me some years ago, when I first came here. We buried them both and put up crosses. I said I would care for this child, that the man might die in peace. She will live with us."

The kind-hearted woman greeted the child pleasantly. In that land it took but very few words to explain tragedies, for they are so common. Since her son wished it she would be only too glad to take another child to her heart. Ah-

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teck had spoken; he was the man of the family, and she would never have thought of discussing the slightest of his desires. It was not only her love she would give for his sake, since she would have lain down her life at his bidding, with happiness in her eyes, if this could have served to lessen his pain. She took the girl's hand in her own, affectionately, and bade her welcome, whereupon Mititesh smiled again and, there and then, began to worship her.

"Pierre, Lucie!" called Uapukun, "this child is Mititesh, whom you know, and from now on she is to be for both of you like another sister."

The children came forth, bashfully at first, and shook hands, looking curiously at her. But they made friends very soon, impressed by the pleasantness of her voice and the gentleness of her manner. They wanted to take her away immediately to see a couple of bear cubs that had been brought in by an Indian, a week or two before, but they could not prevail on her, for there was still some work to do.

Uapukun had brought with her a tump-line and took a fair load upon her shoulders, though her son protested, for her soul longed to share his bur-

dens and make them smaller. The men walked behind her, staggering under great packs, and Mititesh also carried something, while the younger children ran on ahead, bearing the two guns, that were higher than themselves. Other women who had come down to witness the arrival went slowly home, envious, to wait longer for their men.

It was extraordinary to see a road again, and houses and fields. When they neared their own they could see the old cow peacefully munching the grass close to the fence, while a leggy calf stood by. A litter of curly-tailed piglets were scampering in the yard; some geese came forward, with necks extended, truculent as usual; a hen was scratching for her chicks. It was all ever so marvelous.

They entered the little house, that was exceedingly neat and clean, for the wife of Peter McLeod had learnt the best ways of the white women. She put down her pack upon one of the wooden benches and turned to the others, standing up and speaking in a manner that had some dignity.

"*Statomiskatinou*, a welcome to thee, Ahteck, who art safely returned, and to thy friend Paul. A welcome also to the child Mititesh. This house

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is gladdened at the sight of you all. May the blessings of God be upon us!"

They all crossed themselves, devoutly, and Paul took leave of them to return to his mother's house, that was farther down the road. There was a little feast with many good things to eat, and then friends came in, to find out whether the hunting had been good, and cried in amazement at the pelt of the black fox, the news of which they afterwards scattered far and wide. It was late before they all went to bed, so that the children, who had utterly refused to leave the room, began to nod and were finally borne away by their mother. Before retiring, however, Uapukun remained alone for a time with her tall son, a moment she had been longing for. They sat together, in the doorway, where the night breeze was blowing soft and laden with scents from the flowers on the hill-sides. A slender crescent of moon showed in the sky, and tiny clouds scurried across it, so filmy that they never quite concealed it. A woman, belated in visiting a sick neighbor, passed along the road and saw the two, dimly, so that she wondered what pair of lovers there might be in that house, for they were hand in hand, very near one

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another. It was a joy and happiness for them. To the woman it was like a reprieve from some harsh sentence, for the one great terror of her life was that the curse they both believed in might overtake her son when he was far away, so that she would never see him again.

But now he was with her once more, her first man-child, the great sturdy son whose heart was yet as that of a little one, though his courage, like his body, was that of a giant. For the time being it seemed to them as if all dread spirits of evil were being swept away by the same wind that carried off the clouds, and as if *Tshishe Manitou*, the good spirit, was now swaying the whole world.

When they finally rose the woman kissed her tall son, tenderly, and once in her room, where the two younger children also slept, she knelt for a long time by her bed before her lips touched the poor little ring that had been Peter McLeod's. With all her heart she had given thanks that Ah-teck was still with her.

## CHAPTER XVI

### THE SALE OF THE BLACK FOX

IN the morning, of course, every one rose quite late. The attractiveness of a real bed to people who have slept on the ground, and on hard bunks, for many months, is rather hard to describe, although at first sleep does not come very easily in such unwonted luxury. The two children began by filling the little house with the noise of their laughter. They caught up the hands of Mititesh and scurried away with her, to show her many treasures. There was a bark canoe at least two feet long, and a rag doll, and the skin of a weasel captured by the boy during a raid on the chicken coop, and a Canada jay in a cage made of sticks, who shrieked all day long and would take a bit of meat from one's fingers. Besides all this there was the cow and her calf, and the chickens, and five geese led by an impudent gander who always appeared to have a chip on his shoulder.

People began to troop in the road in front of

the house, for there was great excitement that day in Pointe Bleue on account of the black fox. Old decrepit men long past their days of hunting came to see it, and touched it most carefully. One or two of these ancients spoke of having seen others just as fine, but the young folk scoffed and declared it was impossible.

It was really a quite long procession that marched down to the Hudson's Bay Company's Post, and the agent opened his eyes when the skin was placed on the counter. He did his very best, without much success, to conceal his admiration, speaking slowly with a show of great candor.

"It is a very fair pelt," he declared. "Yes, a very nice pelt indeed. It is worth a good price and of course I will pay well. Oh! Ahtech, thou art the lucky man! It is fortunate, with a trapper of thy sort there will be little haggling. We both know the worth of fur. I will give five hundred dollars and, to boot, a new rifle that shoots many times, stronger than thy old 44, a rifle that drops a bull moose in his tracks when it is aimed by a hunter such as thou."

He expected a long conversation, but Ahtech quietly picked up the skin.

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"It belongs to Jean Caron's daughter," he said, "for it was taken on her father's line. I must show it everywhere and get the best price for her. It may be that I will come back, but I must see others."

The agent did not worry much, for he knew that it would be a long time before the pelt could be bought and was glad of an opportunity to communicate with headquarters.

At the French company the process was repeated. The agent at once offered fifty dollars more.

"It is a good price, *monsieur*," said the man, a polite little *Frenchman from France*, as he was called to distinguish him from the *habitants*, "but now I will tell you. You are known to all as a good trapper, a man who takes no debt and always brings good fur. I want a man like you always to deal with our house. I will say at once five hundred and seventy-five dollars. Think how great a lot of money that is. Enough for a nice new house, or for horses and cows. Think of all that may be bought for that!"

His arms opened widely, as if seeking to embrace a vast bulk of things in order to show the

inexhaustible purchasing power of such a sum.

But Ahteck only nodded quietly, and with a calmness that was exasperating to the Frenchman, repeated that there was no hurry, and that he would wait before deciding.

"One instant! Just one last word!" exclaimed the agent. "I know that my house will blame me for paying such a price. Never will I obtain forgiveness from them. They will tell me I am as a child that does not know how to buy. But I want you to deal with me, and now I say six hundred dollars, all in money. By no means in trade. Here it is, all cash, fine new bills, look at them—just give one look! It is enormous!"

With the speed and deftness of a conjuror he had opened his cash drawer and was covering the wide counter with bills—ones and twos and fives and tens, till an immense space was taken up and the crowd stood around, fascinated by all the huge wealth spread out before them.

But Ahteck, towering above the others, stood quite unmoved. Had he not for some years helped with the trading at Grand Lac? Did he not know all the arts and wiles employed in dealing with the Indians for their fur.

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"There is no hurry," he repeated. "Maybe I will come back again."

He left the place, quietly, with the interested crowd at his heels, while the agent rapidly picked up his money and locked it in the drawer before running over to the telephone to obtain the telegraph office at Roberval and send an inquiry to New York. He knew that at Révillon's, that year, good medium black foxes were quoted at about two thousand dollars, and that this was such an exceptional pelt that it would retail for much more.

In the meanwhile the Hudson's Bay agent was speeding toward the same office in his buggy, to wire at headquarters for instructions. He knew Ahtech of old and was aware that, in the end, only a big price would get that pelt.

The news, of course, had already spread very wide. People as far as Chambord, and perhaps Chicoutimi, had heard of the black fox. At the Hotel Commercial in Roberval a couple of fur buyers from New York and Chicago heard about it as they stepped into the bar to buy some cigars. They did not wait for the end of the long tale the bartender was ready to narrate but rushed out in

the road. One of them, a long, lathy chap, beat his competitor by a couple of yards in the race. Their goal was a rickety buggy harnessed to a despondent horse attended by a half-breed *charretier*.

"Give me a show too, old man!" panted his stouter rival.

"Not much," exclaimed the winner. "To Pointe Bleue, my man, and hammer that old plug of yours."

The driver only understood the name of his destination and started with local leisure, until his excited fare shook him, yelling "*Vite, vite!*"

But a moment later another buggy arrived on the scene, with a horse that seemed rather faster, and the fat man annexed it.

"Pointe Bleue!" he shouted. "Five dollars if you catch that other fellow and pass him!"

Their sporting blood was aroused. Through the long street of the peaceful village they bumped and rocked over great ruts, scaring dogs and chickens, watched with amazement by the quiet *habitants* and mightily cheered by the usual irrepressible small boy.

But when they reached the open country the

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contest, if anything, grew still more exciting. There were many sharp hills up which the horses panted, going down again at a gallop that menaced the wobbling wheels with destruction. But the first man held the narrow road and smartly prevented the second buggy from passing him, at least until the reservation had been reached. Here, however, the road became much wider and the rear carriage shot ahead with a whoop of triumph. But they were neck and neck when they reached Ahtech's house, where the horses halted with vacillating knees and smoking nostrils.

Jumping out they both yelled together:  
"Where's that fox pelt?"

Ahtech had just returned. Some of the men were still discussing the events of the morning, in front of the house. Uapukun was quietly ironing a boiled shirt for her son, for the next Sunday's mass, and little Mititesh was sewing; the other two children stood together, and gazed with staring eyes.

Ahtech looked at the two men very calmly. He hardly seemed to remember where he had placed that skin. He scratched his head very deliberately, and at last found it under some other furs.

But the buyers were shrewd fellows and had already cooled down. They were not particularly impressed, having had a long experience in dealing with Indians. They examined the pelt very carefully, and a look of indifference passed over their faces, as if they realized that they had taken a great deal of trouble over a matter of no great importance.

"What do you want for it?" they finally asked together.

"It is worth much money," said Ahteck.

"I suppose you think it's something very wonderful," commented one of the buyers.

"I've seen lots of better ones," asserted the other, indifferently.

Ahteck took up the skin.

"Then you no want," he said, quietly moving off to put it away. "Me think it no rain long time. Fine weather!"

"Well, we're here to buy fur," admitted the Chicago man.

"Anything down to muskrat and weasel," put in the New York buyer.

"I think I can let you have six hundred!"

"I'll go twenty better!"

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"And ten more!"

"Look here, young fellow. I'll give you the top price at once! Seven hundred dollars and not another cent. Here's your money, cold cash. I'll count it out right before you!" The Chicago man displayed his wallet, bulging with many banknotes.

"No hurry," said Ahteck. "I think maybe I go with it to Quebec. Maybe Montreal."

"Then you'll spend a lot of money. Maybe get full of whiskey and lose all you have. I'll tell you! Maybe I can do just a little better if you'll sell me all the rest of your stuff," said the stout man, knowing that Renfrew or Laliberté might offer a large price.

But Ahteck again shook his head.

"Me think I no sell now," he said.

"Well, we'll be here for a couple of days yet," said one of the men. "Let us know if you change your mind. I'm sure nobody will do any better for you. Just think it over."

"All right," said Ahteck.

The buyers knew it was useless to bargain any further just then, and were driven back slowly behind their tired nags, after they had inspected the

remainder of the catch, sorted it, and made further offers for the lot.

In this manner the bargaining lasted for a couple of weeks, and finally Ahteck obtained a very good price. Telegrams had come from Winnipeg and Paris, and the wires had been busy to London and New York and Chicago. Other traveling buyers had come and the first two had returned, and Ahteck was courted, and refused fat cigars and the surreptitious exhibition of well-filled flasks, all of which made him a hard fellow to tackle.

At last it was said, with bated breath, that he got eleven hundred dollars for it, and that there were heart-burnings among some of the unsuccessful bidders. The pelt was taken away but it is not known whether it was eventually purchased by some noblewoman of London, or boyar of Russia, or millionaire of New York or Chicago, after it finally reached its destination.

Ahteck at once went with Mititesh to settle her father's indebtedness, amounting in all to a couple of hundred dollars. After this he took the train for Chicoutimi, where the balance was deposited for her in the savings bank, by the advice of the

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Fathers, who entirely approved of the arrangement made in the woods.

But, of course, there were also the other pelts, which sold well. Each of the two men obtained a good sum for their shares, and the girl's part of the rest of the fur taken on her father's line amounted to nearly a hundred dollars. In this manner Mititesh became an heiress and a young person of importance in the community.

Thus began the short summer season, and Mititesh went to school with the other children. About the house she always made herself very useful, and it was only a short time before Uapukun loved her like her own daughter.

That season Ahteck obtained several good jobs of guiding, and every time he went away the child would watch him out of sight, and return to the house looking rather sad, to find the time very long until he returned. Finally came the end of August and active preparations were being made for the coming winter. At this time Mititesh began to look at Ahteck very wistfully, without saying anything, until one day she could stand the suspense no longer and met him at the gate of the little enclosure in front of the house. She had

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grown taller and more rounded in her fourteenth year, and more than one had hinted that she was doubtless going to be a very beautiful girl.

"I—I want to go with thee and Paul," she said. "Thou knowest I can work very hard and be useful to you both. I will mend clothes and do the cooking and stretch pelts and set the snares for *uapush*, the rabbits. Please, can I go? My heart is longing sorely for the great woods. I—I want to go back. I love thy mother Uapukun, and the two children, but never since I can remember have I spent a winter in houses. Please, I want to go!"

But Ahteck shook his head, perhaps with some regret.

"Thou must go to school," he said, "and learn many more things. It is not fitting for thee to go with us now. Listen, there is Philippe, who is a very good man. He will go up with his wife and the three children, of whom one is a big boy. He will take thy line and pay thee a share of the fur. I have arranged it with him."

"Is that thy will?" she asked, her lower lip quivering a little.

"It is that which is right," he said. "I have

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spoken to my mother and others. But here comes Father Laroux, and we will ask him."

"There is no need to ask him," she declared. "My father said that I was always to do thy bidding, because thou wert very wise. If it is thy will I shall obey. It is enough."

But Ahteck insisted upon stopping the good old priest, who was walking quietly along the road, reading his breviary, and explained the situation to him.

The old missionary placed his hand on the girl's head, smiling at her in his kindly way.

"Thou art a real little *sauvage*," he told her, "and the great woods will always appeal to thee. Ay, I also regret the days of my strength when I traveled far in them, even to the shores of the great Bay. But this big lad Ahteck is right. It is not fitting now that a growing maiden should go away in such a manner."

Mititesh bowed her pretty head, submissively, but two great drops that had been trembling upon her lashes rolled down her cheek, and this was the only sign she gave of her dreadful disappointment. It was very bitter to think that she would not see the graves of her parents again, that she would

no longer journey over the rapids and the great tree-shadowed dead waters upon which the leaping fish made rings of pearly ripples. Her heart became very heavy within her breast. She returned slowly within the house, and Uapukun looked at her, curiously, but never questioned her.

A few more days went by, all too fast for the child. A good many hunters were leaving, and when the last day came the little steamer churned around the point and stopped offshore. The lake was beautifully calm, the sun glittered brightly on its surface and, in the distance, big white gulls were sweeping in great circles. The deciduous trees had already begun to assume the glory of their autumnal tints and the days were shortening fast. Most of those Indians whose grounds were far away had already left at the beginning of the month, and after the hunters who were now going away should disappear on the other side of the lake there would be none left at the reservation but some women and children, with old men too feeble to undergo a hard winter's toil, besides the priests.

On the shore, that day, there was much animation. It was no such great departure as when the

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large crowd goes to Portage à l'Ours to begin the journeys up the Ashuapmouchouan and its far tributaries, yet a good many were leaving and their goods were piled up in mighty heaps. There were fifty-pound and a hundred-pound bags of flour, apparently enough to feed a small army, and pork and tea and salt and sugar and small kegs of powder, with a host of other things such as clothing and blankets and tents folded small and cleverly roped. Also there were a good many new traps, to replace others finally rusted away in the woods. There were little ones for small animals, and larger sizes, up to those weighing from twelve to sixteen pounds apiece, furnished with heavy chains, such as are used for bear.

The men were hurriedly carrying all these loads on board the steamer, in their canoes, making many trips back and forth amid laughter and songs and farewells. Some of them were leaving with whole families while others allowed their wives and children to remain behind. A few of these men hunted grounds that were not very far away, and would probably return over snow and ice to spend Christmas at home, bringing back some of their fur.

Uapukun, of course, was on the beach with her children, who ran among the piles of provisions and returned every minute to tell Uncle Caribou to bring back many big bears for them to see. At early daylight the woman had run up to the little church to place a candle on the altar, and now she looked very gravely, with a throbbing heart, at the little steamer that would once again take her big son away.

Ahteck and Paul were quite ready, and their loads were all on board. Before the final start the children claimed their kisses, but Mititesh stood apart, a sad little figure, making every effort to restrain all evidence of her desolation. But Ahteck went up to her, prompted by the great affection and sympathy he had always felt for her. He kissed her gently, bending over, and patted her cheek, bidding her to have courage. After this he had to turn away and, silently, the big drops began to fall again.

When, at last, all the travelers were on board the steamer, that was heavily laden and low in the water, a little bell jingled and the engine began to puff, asthmatically, slowly revolving the big stern wheel. The whistle called out three

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salutes and the departing crowd looked ashore, waving brightly colored handkerchiefs at their friends, who kept on getting smaller and more indistinct, till they disappeared.

The decks were terribly cluttered up with their big cargo. A few of the men had managed to get whiskey, strong white alcohol they could scarcely swallow without coughing, and soon began to sing. Before long some of them sat down, with foolish expressions on their dark faces, while others stretched out on the deck and fell asleep. But by far the greater number were in their right minds and began to argue, with many gestures, on the inexhaustible subjects of peltry and the prices it might bring in the forthcoming spring.

Ahteck, as always, was very silent, though not unhappy. The great longing for the wilderness was upon him also. It is impossible to question an Indian of the north without being told that he prefers the winter and its hardships to the idle time of summer. There was also the excitement of the great gamble that is trapping, for a man never knows what the catch will be or which furs will rise or fall in price. The prospect of the long winter was by no means distasteful, and then,

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always, there was the hope that whenever the great curse should chance to fall, it might spend its force upon him alone, in the wilds, far from all those he loved, so that they might have no share in it. For himself he had no more fear than has the soldier, inured to battle, who marches to the enemy.

## CHAPTER XVII

### FALLING LEAVES AND GROWING LOVES

THOSE who had been left on the shore kept on looking, long after the little steamer's slender plume of wood smoke had disappeared in the soft haze that washed distant headlands with tints of faint blues and lavenders. Uapukun returned home with the two children, but Mititesh remained behind. Ahteck's mother had discerned the feeling which, as yet unconsciously, was growing in the child's mind, and this devotion to the big son caused the woman to love the girl more strongly. He had no friends, seldom mingling with others, never taking part in rejoicings or dances, keeping to himself at all times, excepting within the little house, where he was always gentle and kindly but seldom joined in any talk. It was good to think that some one was growing up who might some day make him happy.

Mititesh did not leave the shore until long after it had been deserted by every one else. She

had remained seated upon a water-worn rock, in the lee of an old boat that had been left there to decay until the ice of coming winters should grind up what was left of its old ribs and planking.

Hour after hour she had gazed toward the place, hidden by the vastness of the waters, where the Peribonca dug its ever-shifting channel in the maze of sand-bars, and in which the steamer had disappeared, bearing the two men who were again going to taste the glory of the wilderness and confront its perils. She could close her eyes and see them poling up the narrow Aleck River, with the poles clanking upon the rocks. She could follow them through the two big lakes with the long jutting points, and finally up the little river where the crosses had been planted. There, she knew, they would stop and say a prayer. By this time the wild grasses would have begun to spring on the mounds, and seeds of the wild raspberry, that always seem to follow the footsteps of man, would be sprouting around them. Then, in the years to come, the thorny growth would come up rank and thick, and the hares would make little paths criss-crossing it, and there the women and

children of other generations might set snares for them.

An immense longing had come to her, to be there and pray also, to follow the long trails, watching the blazes and the trap-marks, carefully noting tracks, breathing the air that seemed so much better and purer there than in this haunt of many men. More than by all other things, although as yet she hardly realized it, Mititesh was filled with the desire to be with Ahtech, to follow him—to be within hearing of his voice.

She finally returned to the little house and soon went to bed, too heartsore to make more than a pretence of eating supper, and the woman Uapukun, waking in the night, heard her sobbing, gently.

The months stretch out as long as years, and the years as eternities, to those over whose heads but a few summers have passed. To Mititesh the period that was to elapse before the trappers returned seemed like time without end, never to be finished. She attended school faithfully, and learned a great deal, because it was Ahtech's desire. She had so far penetrated the abstruse science of numbers that she was able to add to-

gether the days of the many months before the coming of the early summer. Upon a glaringly hued calendar vaunting the virtues of a patent medicine she marked off every new morning as conscientiously as she said her prayers, and perhaps even more eagerly. She had not forgotten the masses that were to be said, and possessed a comforting faith that by this time all was well with the souls of those who had been left behind.

By and by water left outside filmed over in the pails, and one day the yellowed grasses gleamed with frost. Then, after a short interval, came the first of the really cold days, when a thick skin of ice formed on the ponds, growing heavier every night. A little later, one evening, the wind ceased to blow, and in the morning the ice was glistening, as far as one could see, upon the surface of the great lake. By and by dog-teams were hurrying over it. The snow began to pile up high, making great drifts, and a night finally came when the little church bell rang for the mass at midnight, for Christmas had come.

After this, very slowly, the days began to grow longer and, at times, the breath of the winds that

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swept the lake became milder. As the weeks went by the thick ice on the lake broke up into a great jumble of huge cakes which the northerly gales piled up on the shores. But finally these began to melt away, and suddenly the birches and the poplars put on their new dresses of tender greens and little flowers peeped out on the hillsides.

The clangor of the calls of geese in triangular lofty flights towards the north was heard. They were going to meet Ahteck, thought Mititesh. Diver ducks and sheldrakes came first to the lake, with a few big gulls, and then other waterfowl and wading birds, and one morning the air was filled with the chirping of swallows who began forthwith to gather around muddy spots on the road, for material wherewith to build or strengthen domiciles under the eaves of barns, while others clung to the sand-banks, clearing deep holes for the benefit of the families that would soon be hatched. Came a day when the very first lot of Indians returned, and at intervals others, until Mititesh, who watched during every moment she could spare, caught sight of two canoes driving homeward with a brisk little wind behind them. Something in her heart told her that these were

the men she had been watching for. Nor was she mistaken.

Ahteck found her wonderfully grown. In a few days she would reach her fifteenth birthday. Her face had increased in beauty, and Uapukun could not say enough about what a constant blessing she was in the house, and how fond the two younger ones were of her.

Another year came and went, and Mititesh no longer went to school, for she had learnt all that was taught the children of Pointe Bleue. She remained with Uapukun, taking most of the work of the little house upon her shoulders and helping in the turning out of moccasins and other things that could be sold. As with many of the maidens of the dusky inhabitants of Pointe Bleue, she seemed to change well-nigh from one day to another into a tall girl showing no more signs of childhood. The young men were apt to turn and look at her. Visitors to the reservation, coming from the big hotel at Roberval, if they chanced to see her, were surprised at her looks, for she was more graceful in movement, more animated of countenance, than most of the young women there. It looked as if the tincture of white education and

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custom had added color and beauty to the traits of native origin. Several tried to take her photograph but she always ran away, with instinctive modesty or shyness.

Came more departures of Ahteck, that were very sad, and home-comings over which all rejoiced, until her eighteenth birthday found her a woman full grown in stature and loveliness, with features less heavy than are found in most of her race, and a low voice full of charm. In the little church the attention of many of the men was diverted to her, though she never took the slightest note of them. Some of them took to lingering during the long evenings of early summer, near the gate of the little house. There was a man called Baptiste, though he was better known under his Indian name of Peshu, the Lynx, more venturesome than the rest, or perhaps even more strongly attracted not only by her looks but also by the money in the savings bank, who began to pay her a great deal of attention. Finally, one day, meeting her on the road, he declared that he loved her and wanted to marry her, and pressed her for an answer. He was a very big, strong man, the only one in the reservation who ap-

proached Ahteck a little in size and strength, and not bad looking. But Mititesh looked at him in a startled, frightened way, and, shaking her head, ran away, dismayed and trembling.

With the years she seemed to have become more timid and retiring. On the occasion of his last return she did not greet Ahteck with the effusive joy he had become accustomed to. Rather she met him with downcast eyes, as if seeking to conceal the light of her happiness at seeing him again. He saw that there was a change, or rather he felt it, dimly, without fathoming its import. To him she had been a child, just a little thing whom he had carried on his back, and who had, in the bitter cold of long nights in the wilderness, nestled her pretty head against him, confidently, with an affection that was like that of some petted thing for the one who takes care of it. Without being aware of it, during the last winter in the woods, the man had, more strongly than ever before, felt the desire to return to the little house, and experienced a loneliness that irked him sorely.

He was perhaps even a little hurt at what seemed like a greater coolness on her part, at this new home-coming. How beautiful she had

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grown! He looked at her more intently than he ever had and when, turning towards him, she saw his eyes fixed upon her, her own dropped again at her feet and she showed heightened color.

On that first night, as Ahteck and Paul lingered at the table, having eaten heartily of good things they had long been deprived of in the wilderness, Mititesh moved quietly about them, with the grace of a young doe, serving them, attending to all their wants, listening eagerly to the tale of their hunt, her heart full of gratitude when they spoke of fine new crosses they had made to take the place of the old ones, that were succumbing to time and stress of weather.

Again Ahteck looked at her, often. How changed she was. He could hardly realize that it was the young starving thing whom he had carried so many miles on his back, with her little hands grasping his neck behind, and who had slept through part of the hard journey.

For a very long time, doubtless, his heart-strings had begun to twine about her. But to him it was an affection that had appeared to be a purely brotherly one. The idea of love would have filled him with consternation, for his somber ideas of

future evil obsessed him as strongly as ever they had. She was one of the beloved household, like the mother or the two younger children, to be guarded from harm, to be spared pain and suffering at any cost of anguish on his part.

The change was greater in himself than in the girl, for in her there was but the development of maidenly modesty and timidity while in him, insidiously, mysteriously, the whole of his being was becoming altered before this bud of womanhood that was opening its petals early, as with others of her race, with a charm and a fragrance that was her own. He was blind to it as yet, groping in a darkness such as affects only simple, honest souls and leaves them awed and bewildered at the coming of light. He could not realize that for a long time his thoughts, in the wilderness, were always coming back to her, that her graceful form rose in the smoke of his woodland fires, pierced through the haze of the mornings, held a part in the visions of his dreams.

This change that had come upon him was plain and clear to Uapukun his mother. In her heart it brought hope. She loved the girl while sharing Ahtech's belief that in the man's love there

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would be peril to the child who was now a woman. But this belief did not prevent her from desiring keenly that the two should wed. Like any other mother she thought that nothing could matter so long as her son might be made happy, even if for only a few brief years. But she spoke of this neither to the girl nor to her son, feeling that no intervention was needed on her part, that fate held them all in the hollow of its hand.

An offer soon came for Ahteck to go guiding, but he refused. The roof of the little house needed repairs and he wanted a new canoe to take the place of the old one, that was going to pieces, for none of them can stand very long such journeys as that up the Aleck. He might have had the work done by others, and made better wages, probably, by guiding, but everything conspired to make him stay. The mother hinted always that it was too bad that he should be away most of the year and leave again nearly as soon as he returned; others might not do the work so conscientiously; home and dear ones were holding him back, and, more than all, the love that was beginning to surge into his being and that was to become a passion holding him in thrall. Gradually,

though very fast, a great longing came to him for this girl who, in childhood, had given the best there was in her of toil and effort to her parents, and now kept this up in the household of these people who had adopted her, ever showing unending love and gratitude to them all.

Paul also had noticed the change in his friend. Ahtech was not aware that over there in the shack, whenever they met for a day or two at intervals of hunting, he spoke often of the girl. The smaller man would sit quietly, stretching a pelt and smoking his pipe, listening and drawing inferences. Once he had spoken, rather in jest, of the child's promise to be the big hunter's wife, but had been met by immediate silence, by a return of the somber moods that were so easy to awaken and so hard to dispel, and therefore had never referred to the matter again.

A couple of weeks after their return from the woods Paul had come in and been kept for supper. The meal was finished and the two younger children were playing out on the road. Uapukun sat by the window, finishing some sewing in the long twilight of summer days. Ahtech's partner was lighting his pipe, holding a splinter to the

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open door of the little stove, because in the woods one learns to be saving of matches and the habit is one that sticks. He was in a very happy mood, the trading having just been finished and the season's peltry sold at a good price. Also he was thinking of a certain young woman with whom he had walked on the long road, in the evening, hand in hand, and in whose dark eyes he had read promise of future happiness.

Mititesh was clearing the table. Presently she brought a damp cloth with which she wiped it, and Paul looked at her, in frank admiration.

"'Tis a great wonder, Mititesh," he said laughingly, "what a beautiful tall girl thou hast grown. Who would have thought to see thee such a handsome maiden at the time thou mad'st thy promise to Ahtech to be his woman? Indeed I hope this is still in thy mind, and that thou rememberest those words, in our camp in the big woods."

But the girl reddened and ran out of doors, with her heart beating fast. The other two children had just come in. Paul was laughing heartily at his own good-natured, if somewhat clumsy, notion of humor. He slapped Ahtech on the shoulder, with a resounding smack.

"Thou big hulking bear," he said, "every kind of good fortune always remains with thee and thine, in spite of thy sober old face. Make sure that I shall be one of the first to know, that I may wish thee happiness."

But to this Ahteck made no answer, and Uapukun looked keenly at her son, seeking to find out whether there was any ground for hope. After a few minutes, seeing that his friend looked very grave and much put out, Paul went away, bidding them all good night, and they heard him as he tramped away on the hard road while he hummed one of his old songs.

Little pitchers have big ears, and the two children had caught some of Paul's words. For a moment they stood to one side, whispering, and ran up to Ahteck just as Mititesh was coming in again.

"Oh! Uncle Caribou!" clamored the little girl, "is Pearl going to be thy wife?"

"And will there be a grand wedding in the church, with the bell ringing, and a dance with fiddles, and people all in their best clothes?" asked the boy, eagerly.

But Uapukun, seeing that her son was much

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disturbed, told the children it was no concern of theirs and hurried them off to bed. They left, obediently enough, but looked back over their shoulders as they scampered up the little wooden stairs, and their happy laughter was pealing.

The girl had put her hand up to her breast, suddenly, and she had looked down at her feet. Then she sat down, quietly, and took up the knitting of a big sock. She also looked somewhat dismayed, her eyes never wandering from her task. Yet they may have shown gladness as if, in the distance, there had been in them the vision of a pleasant dream that might come true. The man remained utterly silent, gazing persistently out of the window, in the fast gathering darkness whence, perhaps, the powers of evils might be on the watch. Finally Mititesh rose and went into the other room, to prepare dough that was to rise for the morning's baking. As soon as this was finished she bade the others good night and left for her own little chamber, on the same floor.

For a few days Ahtek remained very somber and preoccupied, working hard during the day and at night sitting outside, near the door, for many hours, always gazing towards some very distant

place in the great North, whereon seemed to fall the shadow of a great evil. There was a battle going on in his heart, a fierce struggle whose outcome, he thought, could only be disastrous, whichever way it might turn. He deemed it the beginning of his punishment. If he yielded to his longing he could but live in constant fear of having led Mititesh into dire peril. If he resisted he must lose something greater than life itself, and that had become a part of his being like the strength of his thews or the keenness of his vision.

It had come gradually, but none the less the shock was a terrible one when he realized how passionately he loved Mititesh—ay, an appalling shock, for his alarms returned in full power. He clenched his great fists and braced his broad back, swearing to himself that it should never be. He knew! Indeed he knew! These were doings of the devil of the priests, or the *Matshi Manitou* of his ancestors, that was seeking to lure him farther to his destruction. They were making ready to strike at him through the loyal, throbbing breast of Mititesh, to inflict unknown and frightful evils upon her that they might the better torture his

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heart and leave him helpless in his misery to cry out for pity, for a mercy that would never be accorded to him.

All these things, of course, his simple mind saw but vaguely, but he was like the wolf that smells a trap and fears it, even though he may be ravening with hunger. The snare of the evil spirits had been most cleverly set, and no odor of man or devil clung to it, but his suspicions had been aroused and he scented a danger ahead, as if already he could feel the crushing jaws and the cruel, pointed teeth of steel that were ready to snap together and grind into his quivering flesh.

Danger to himself was a thing he never thought of. The prospect of pain left him indifferent, as far as he was personally concerned. He despised it as his forebears had done in the olden days of warfare against other tribes, when captured warriors submitted, deriding and insulting the victors, to the tortures inflicted at the stake. But he would allow no power of evil to crush him through Mititesh, the Pearl of Fresh Waters. He would not let them punish him by first tearing away at her soft flesh the more surely to wreak their ferocious vengeance.

A few more days went by and, one evening, mother and son were once again alone in the living room. She was mending clothes by the light of a small lamp while he sat close to her, battling with the thoughts that constantly assailed him.

"It has again been a good winter's trapping," finally said Uapukun, after a long silence. "There is no trapper hunting from Pointe Bleue who brings in so much fur, year after year, for no other could travel so long a line. I often think that thy work is too hard, with never any rest. Thou wilt kill thyself with toil. Already thy back, long before thy thirtieth year has come, is beginning to bend under the great loads of thy tump-line. Every year there is much money put aside, since it is all given in my keeping. What will be done with it all?"

"It will be for thee and the children. Thou wilt also give some to the girl Mititesh, if ever she should need it."

"Dost thou never think of the need of it for thyself, for the home thou mayest seek some day? It is all thine, but that which came from Peter McLeod my husband, that shall be for his chil-

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dren. And Mititesh is no longer a girl now, but a very beautiful woman."

"Ay, very beautiful," he admitted, nodding in assent. "There never was another like her."

He had no need to be told of her beauty. The image of it was always before him, waking as well as in his dreams. But an expression of pain came over his face, one that Uapukun was quick to detect, her eyes being shrewd with the great love she bore her son. For a moment she hesitated, with her hand pressed to her breast, yet she spoke again, with some effort.

"Mititesh would kneel and kiss the places trodden on by thy feet," she said, very slowly.

He looked at her, a vague fear showing in his eyes.

"No!" he exclaimed. "It must never be. Dost thou think that I brought her from the camp where she was starving, and that she has grown in beauty and goodness among us, only to be dragged by me towards those evil things that must come to me some day, swiftly, like the crashing storms that whiten the lake? I tell thee again that it must never be!"

He had forgotten the child, nay, the woman

who slept but a few paces away, separated from them by a slender partition he had built up for her with his own hands. The man's deep voice, in his excitement or his suffering, roused her from slumber. She lifted herself from her bed, her hands braced behind her, wondering at the loud speech, fearing that some trouble had arisen, and heard Uapukun's voice, more subdued and yet plain to her keen senses.

"But, oh, Ahtech, my son, thou surely lovest Mititesh."

There was a moment's silence, during which she listened, trembling. In the man's simple mind had come the idea that a lie might save his mother from suffering.

"No, mother," he answered, haltingly. "I—I do not love Mititesh!"

He had thought he would be able to deceive his mother, to prevent her from knowing that another source of misery had been added to his life. But Uapukun had understood him. She had no need to look at the arms that were now hanging limp at his side, at the head bowed down until his chin rested on his breast. Big silent tears began to

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well out from the eyes of the woman who had already shed so many.

But in the next room those words had penetrated clearly and stabbed their way into the girl's heart!

She was bred of people who from time immemorial had accepted hardship and pain as things inherent in their lives, with hardly a murmur. Therefore she merely dug her nails in the palms of her hand, silently, suffering as do the beasts of the wild, with never a whimper or a groan. Yet in such folk the great primal instincts and passions are as all the world over. The dreadful sentence had struck a chill through her—a chill like that of cold steel—that brought with it a fierce pain, a pang too great for endurance. Then, in the extremity of her grief, she buried her face in her small pillow, that she might make no outcry, that no sob of hers should reach the others. Most keenly she remembered those days of the great hunger in the woods, but no starvation of the body could be compared with the awful feeling of emptiness under the breast at which she clutched.

It was just a little more than four years ago, when she was yet a child, that she had told Ahteck that one day she would be his woman. Somehow, with hardly any further thought anent the matter, the idea of it had quietly taken a firmer and firmer hold upon her, becoming implanted in her mind and growing, ever growing, with strong grasping roots. And these, so deeply sunken, were now being torn out, brutally, fiercely, and she was left panting and exhausted, with lips trembling, so that for the rest of the night she could only stare through a darkness that was a long agony.

But the last star faded out again, and the sun rose and the birds sang. Yet after the two children had left for school the house became like one of mourners. Mititesh had battled with herself bravely, though she looked like one who has been in the grasp of death and has but recently become able to toil again. Uapukun was moving about the house in silence, attending to various needs patiently, long-sufferingly, like some over-driven beast of burden. Ahteck had gone out very early, and spaded up a good part of the garden, between the growing plants. But he came in again after the work was done. At times he uttered a few



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words, in his low, grave voice, yet all of them avoided the eyes of the others, as if a single glance would have sufficed to bring despair among them.

At this time a bell began to toll in the little wooden spire of the church of the Oblates, and they crossed themselves. It marked a mass and the christening of little children borne in their mothers' arms, a time of rejoicing and hope for others.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### THE BLOW UNRETURNED

As they stood in the room with heads bent they heard Paul. He was coming along the road and, as usual, was singing away in a loud voice whose merriness made up for a great lack of quality.

"Ah! *Bonjour, bonjour!*" he cried, coming in. "How are you all? I have great news to tell you. For a long time Xavier Papineau has been coming to the house, making the big eyes at my sister Anne. Yesterday evening she comes in, and the old mother she was peeling some *patates*, and I was shaving wood for a pair of *raquettes*, and Anne she look so *innocente* and she says, 'Maman, thou knowest Xavier,' and the old *Maman* she says, 'Know Xavier! He is always *fourré* around here, or waiting outside on the road, or bringing flowers from his garden. Certainly I know Xavier!' And then Anne she looks a long time at her *bottes*, and she says Xavier has asked her to marry him—and—and—he wants to be

married *tout de suite* and—and. . . . The old *Maman* she looks at me and asks me what I think of that *coquin Xavier* and I wink my eyes and say he is no good and Anne she gets red in the face and says we are both very *méchant* and *Maman* and I we laugh. Oh! What laughs! Then *Maman* she drops the *patates* and kisses Anne, and me too, and the wedding is for ten days, and they have borrowed Xavier's horse and gone to Roberval for a hat with feathers on it, as if the tails of our roosters could not give them plenty."

"I am very glad," said Uapukun. "Xavier is a fine fellow and I hope Anne will be very happy."

"Yes! He is a *bon garçon*, and he has a cow and a horse; also many fine pigs. So there will be a fine wedding in the church, and Père Laroux has promised to marry them; I have just seen him. Then there will be a dinner in the house and after that a dance in Xavier's new barn, which is painted red. It will be *superbe*; ay, a fine *veillée* it will be. We will have Hyppolite Lechandre, he of the crooked leg, and Dougald *l'Ecossais* with their fiddles and little Bernard with his accordion. Every one at Pointe Bleue is coming. So you will all be at the dinner and

the dance. Mititesh, see to it that thou wearest thy best *hardes* and pretty ribbons in thy hair, for I shall dance with thee, many dances!"

He capered around the room, not ungracefully, his face beaming with smiles, but the other three remained silent and he saw at once that something had gone wrong, so that he stopped suddenly.

"Well, why don't you speak? What is the matter? Are you not going to come?" he asked, anxiously.

"I—I have become too old for such things," said Uapukun.

"Thou art not old, and since when were women too old to come and gossip at a wedding? The oldest will be there, as well as the young, and it will remind them of the days when they also prayed to *La Vierge Marie* for happy days. But thou, Ahtech?"

"In all these years thou knowest I never went to a *veillée*," answered Ahtech, turning his head away.

"Then it is surely time for thee to begin. But thou, Mititesh, the most beautiful girl at Pointe Bleue—thou wilt surely come. I will dance with thee, many dances, though there is one other I

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must dance with also. I will make all the other men jealous, for they will also want to dance with thee."

"Oh! I could not dance," she cried. "I—I shall never dance again!"

"But what has happened? I left you all so happy, only a day or two ago, and now your faces are all that of *kukukuu*, the speaking owl, that bewails himself at night."

"Nothing has happened," declared Uapukun, sadly.

"And you will not come? But I tell you it will be a great feast of my family! Haven't we all been the best of friends? And now people will say that we must have quarreled, or that you despise us. Then Anne will surely weep—weep on her wedding day, a thing that always brings bad fortune, as every one knows. Why! Miti-tesh! Are we not good old friends? In the days that are gone, when we traveled all together in the big woods, thou wouldst have done anything for me, as I would for thee! Did I not help bury thy people and make crosses and pray at thy side?"

The young man looked red in the face, griev-

ously disappointed, and they all could see that this was a blow to him.

"Yes," answered the girl. "Thou wert in truth a good friend, and I would not willingly cause thee pain."

"And thou, Ahteck? Have we not been partners for long years? Have we not lived together like brothers, with never a quarrel or a harsh word, and gone together through hunger and cold and hard toiling? I—I cannot understand it."

"I was thinking that I am not one to bring good fortune upon a wedding," Ahteck answered, his head still turned away.

"Oh! Is it all thy life that thou art going to be like *kakatshu*, the raven, ever crowing of ill luck? Does not good fortune always attend thee and thy people? Did not my evil luck become good as soon as I began to hunt with thee, so that I have again a little house and a cow, and my mother a roof over her head and plenty to eat? Art thou not a rich man now, with money in plenty at the bank. Just look at him, prospering every day and chattering of ill luck! It is a shame—yes, a shame!"

Ahteck was shaking his head, uncertainly, yet

he was greatly moved by Paul's appeal. It had pained him to refuse, and now he was beginning to yield. Better than any one he realized that fortune had so far attended him faithfully, and those dear to him. It was his misfortune that he deemed all this but a preparation for other things, darksome and evil, that would at last leave him crushed and bleeding, with the knowledge that the time for atonement had come. The idea of his impending punishment was too strongly rooted in his mind ever to change. Nor were such beliefs any evidence of an unsound mind. They were the natural result of faith in ill-understood dogmas, of the instinctive acceptance of old heathen tradition, of a cause that must bring to pass an effect that was inevitable in the light shed by an ancestry of superstitious people.

"If it will make thee happy I will come," he finally consented, uncertainly.

Paul was delighted with the advantage he had obtained, and was quick to press it further.

"Then I have thy promise to come! It is well for never hast thou broken one. I think that Mititesh was wiser than thou, for she was first to say she would not willingly hurt me. Uapu-

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kun, thou wilt surely not let thy children come alone. I shall now count upon you all. Behold! Now I am happy and I can dance again!"'

He took a few funny steps across the room, laughing, after which he leaped over a bench and capered again, until the others could not help smiling at his antics.

"Now I run away," he said, "for fear your minds might change once more. Remember that you have promised. I run away now. *A bientôt!*"'

He rushed out through the door, chuckling, and went along the road bawling:

"Malbrouk s'en va-t-en guerre,  
Mironton, Mironton, Mirontaine  
"Malbrouk s'en va-t-en guerre,  
Qui sait quant y reviendra ?

"Madame monte à sa tour,  
Mironton, Mironton, Mirontaine,  
Madame monte à sa tour,  
Si haut qu'elle peut monter!"

It was a song of olden France he had learned from Révillon's agent, also a merry fellow, and the catchy tune delighted his soul.

Thus it happened that in due time they all went

to the little church, which was crowded to the doors, and where all were dressed in their very best Sunday clothes. After the ceremony was over a goodly procession walked off to Xavier's house, where the great feast was bountifully spread.

Paul's sister was a fine buxom girl, and her husband a fine fellow. They were delighted to greet their guests, and the people sat at improvised tables until there was no more room, and overflowed upon benches, holding tin plates on their laps, with tea-cups near by on the floor or on chairs, while old women brought in the dishes.

It may be said at once that the bridegroom was no niggard. A sheep had been killed, and there was roast young pig, and chickens and geese to the admiration of all beholders. Potatoes were brought in by the bushel, with cabbage and turnips and carrots in profusion, while the tea was made in a clothes boiler. There was also any amount of sweet stuff.

And the presents! It was indeed easy to see that the young couple had many friends. There were fine handkerchiefs of vivid hues dear to the Indian soul, and embroidered things of buckskin,

and glistening pots and pans, and various articles of clothing. Best of all, perhaps, was a sewing-machine, the rarely-attained ambition of all the house-wives of Pointe Bleue, a contribution from Ahteck and a gift so liberal that it brought tears of joy to the round cheeks of the bride when it was brought from Roberval, all shining enamel and bright steel and wood so polished that one could see one's face in it, as in a mirror.

In the memory of man there had never been so fine a wedding at Pointe Bleue. The good fathers from the mission dropped in to bless everybody and wish the couple all happiness. Even the agents of the posts came in, also bearing presents, a length of bright Scotch tartan from one, that would make a dress visible miles away, and a marvelous bunch of artificial flowers with gay feathers from the other, enough to trim at least two gorgeous Sunday hats in the most approved manner of the white people.

After dinner they had to rest a little, to regain their breaths, and finally all trooped over to the barn, that was lighted with all the kerosene lamps that could be borrowed on the reservation. The two violins and the accordion were severally

perched on boards placed upon wooden boxes. The horse and the cow had been taken out and placed in the pasture, back of the house, while the plough and buggy, with the sled and stone-boat, had been pulled out behind the barn. There was any amount of room.

The fiddles uttered some of the dismal sounds absolutely indispensable for perfect tuning, harbingers of the lilting measures to come. Then the musicians looked gravely at one another and, with a nod, began to bestir themselves till one's feet moved of their own accord. They were old Scotch tunes of country dances, and French ones of long ago, mere reminiscences of centuries gone by. In one of the latter Révillon's agent recognized an old dance of which he alone in the crowd knew the words, a thing that little children in France still sing while holding hands:

Sur le pont, d'Avignon,  
Tout le monde, tout le monde;  
Sur le pont, d'Avignon,  
Tout le monde y danse en rond.

They were tunes brought in with the first settlers who had left the coast for the interior, long before the building of the railway, when people

trudged over the old colonization road, now abandoned and overgrown with saplings and shrubs, with bridges fallen in the streams, now well-nigh forgotten of man, which went by the Grand Lac Jacques Cartier. The Indians and the *métis*, the half-breeds, had taken them from the French, and in their hands they had been turned into changelings, though still keeping their cheery lilt.

It was indeed a picturesque crowd. The pure Montagnais and Nascauees are among the darkest of the aboriginal races. In order to be a guest all one had to do was to walk in at the door, that stood wide open. It might have seemed a pity that so many of these Indians had adopted the clothing of white men, yet their fondness for bright colors made up for that, to some extent. There were shawls and scarves of all the primary hues, and it must be acknowledged that some of the ladies panted a little, after that copious dinner, in the grasp of corsets over figures unused to such restraint. Also a few wore heels of fashionable height that were rather apt to catch in the rough surface of the uneven floor-boards. Even some of the men, wonted to the freedom of soft

moccasins and *bottes sauvages*, stoically bore the torture of store shoes. Thus were the tenets of modern style respected and it was all very grand and beautiful, so that every one was happy.

It was unfortunate that a very few of the men, chiefly among the younger ones, had managed to obtain, in spite of the law prohibiting its sale to Indians, certain flasks of strong drink. There is no lack of men who have tasted of the life of jails in punishment for this offense, and yet it goes on, from time to time, among a few sordid individuals who will risk everything for gain. One or two of these young fellows at a time would leave the barn, heated with dancing, stand for a moment in the shadow of the walls, and return smacking their lips and, perchance, coughing from the strength of the vile stuff. But it must be said that the majority were well behaved and sober, so that the ball proceeded joyfully.

When Paul first asked her, Mititesh had hesitated to dance. But he had looked so sorely disappointed that at last she consented, much against her inclination. Then she bethought herself that, after all, it was best to do all she could to conceal her grief from Ahteck and Uapukun. Yes, she

would dance! Why should they know of her distress?

So she bravely put her hand in Paul's and they took their place upon the floor. The fiddles began to play again, and a big half-breed, a man of the world, who had wrought in lumber camps all the way from Quebec to the Rockies, and had even gone into the States, clapped his hands with resounding smacks and called out the figures.

The dancers advanced and retreated, and bowed and curtsied, the ladies very dignified, the men often with more or less clumsy movements, leaping high in the air, laughing loudly, threading the maze with few collisions and finding their places again.

Many others were standing around, among them the daughter of one Jacques Pilon, with whom Paul also danced a good deal and who, it was rumored, was not averse to sitting in the dusk with him near the lake, or walking hand in hand along the road to St. Félicien. The bystanders often called out to one another with rough good humor, or joked with their partners.

"When shall we dance at thy wedding?" a man asked Marie Pilon, as he glided by.

The girl blushed a little, and turned her head with due propriety, remarking upon his impertinence, whereat others burst out in merry laughter.

"Look at Grand Joseph!" another called out. "He surely dances beautifully but his long legs bend out like those of *alik*, the toad."

Wherefore people laughed again, and Joseph advanced with greater dignity, paying no heed to such ribald remarks, with an arm about his partner's waist, a cheap cigar in the corner of his mouth, marching like a conquering hero.

Paul may, like the others, have danced somewhat heavily, yet not without a certain grace. His deep bows and merry gestures were much admired, and none could leap so high or click heels together so cleverly. Mititesh moved with the ease of her youth, with a harmony of motion that was all her own. In the merry laughter, among the happy people crowding the place, she was finding some surcease to her pain.

When the fiddles stopped at the end of the country-dance she looked towards the people standing near the walls, and caught Ahtech's staring eyes, that were immediately withdrawn from her. The man had been devouring her with his

hungry vision, noting the finely chiseled face, the gracefully rounded form, the little hand extended to her partner, the wonderfully heavy coiled tresses on her shapely head, the curve of her red lips, the warm color of her cheeks, the light kindled in her eyes by the unwonted excitement. He clenched his fists and his powerful arms became rigid and hard as iron with the sudden effort he made to control himself again, to pay no heed to her, to pretend that she was nothing more to him than all the others who crowded the place. He turned and moved towards an open, unglazed window and stared out. It was early yet in the evening of the long summer day. A saffron sky mottled with tiny clouds lay above a sun touching the horizon with its great fiery ball. He thought of the places in the far North where he had tramped with her in the majestic silence of great snowy wastes, in the august solitude of the big snow-capped trees, on the long, twisted, perilous path that was a river held in bondage by the frost and groaning in its gyves. The sun disappeared and the tinted clouds faded. People were all about him, in a swarm, and yet he felt himself in a solitude so

great, in a darkness so profound, that he had the sensations of a man become suddenly deaf and blind. He was alone in the world, marked for destruction, a danger to others, a leper compelled to avoid his fellow-men.

Mititesh was determined to dance no more, and yet who should come to her but the bridegroom, insisting on the next turn? It was utterly impossible to affront him by refusing. After this other men would not be denied. Uapukun looked at her, approvingly, glad to see the child having a small meed of pleasure. Who knows whether an innocent, half formed instinct of coquetry did not move the girl, after a time, to show Ahteck how eager other men were to take her in their arms? And so she danced, untiringly, while young men whispered of her wonderful good looks, and other girls perhaps felt twinges of jealousy. And Ahteck had stopped staring out of the window into the darkness, that now was dense, and remained like a statue, with his back to the wall, watching her, utterly unaware of the intensity of his gaze, with his big throbbing heart on fire.

Finally she came to him, her cheeks flushed, her charm and her beauty heightened, in a last effort

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to attract him to her, to cause him to place his arms about her, an effort that was instinctive like the turning of a flower towards the sun.

"Wilt thou not dance, Ahteck?" she asked, softly.

"I know not how to dance," he answered, with a catch in his breath. "I have never danced."

"Wilt thou not try?" she pleaded.

"No, it is no use," he replied, and in his accent was some of the bitterness of his sorrow. "I am not one that can ever share in the happiness of others. Thou canst not understand."

"Try—please try!" she persisted.

But he put out his hand, gently, waving her aside, and then the full weight of her crushing grief fell upon the girl, and she ran out of doors, into the darkness, away from all these people whose joy seemed to make her suffering greater.

The fiddles continued to grind away, loudly, and the old accordion was doing its best. The floor was resounding with the tread of many feet; merry voices were making a babel of French and Montagnais. But through the confusion of it all Ahteck heard a sudden shriek and leaped out of the room, followed by others.

Big Baptiste, better known as Peshu, the Lynx, who had already pestered Mititesh with his attentions, was the cause of the trouble. He had been drinking with some of the others, outside, and when the girl came out and passed by him he had caught her by the waist, probably meaning no great harm but full of the devilment caused by the fiery spirits he had taken.

"Struggle not!" he cried. "Thou canst not escape me! Thou art Mititesh the very beautiful one. Until I have a kiss thou shalt not go!"

But the girl's passion of grief had turned to one of fierce anger; she struggled, wild to be free, to run away from all these people, to reach her home and throw herself upon her bed to weep her heart out. Even now her eyes were full of tears, and when she found that she was unable to tear herself away from the man's grasp she shrieked in her despair.

In two tremendous leaps Ahteck was upon them, while others were streaming out of the barn to see what the matter was. With a fierce grasp he caught Peshu's arms and tore them apart, giving him a push that sent him reeling to the ground while Mititesh staggered away, a few steps off,

shaken and sobbing. But Peshu was swiftly on his feet again, and ran to Ahteck, raging like a maddened bull, and with his great clenched fist dealt him a blow with all the power of the fury that was upon him, full in the face. Then he drew back, watchful, crouching, expecting the battle.

For an instant Ahteck was stunned, but then a frenzy came upon him, and it was good, a relief to the awful turmoil that was in his soul. He advanced, looking like a great antlered moose in a rage and about to clash with his rival. He felt that he was about to tear his adversary limb from limb, to crush him into a bleeding pulp, to kill him. The instinct of the mink about to tear at the throat of the muskrat was upon him, the desire of the wolf for the hot and steaming blood of his prey, the cruelty of the wolverine crunching at the neck of a palpitating victim.

And then, all at once, the memory of that other crashing blow at far-off Grand Lac flashed through his brain in lightning vision. Once more the vengeful curse of the spirits of evil was fastening its talons more firmly upon him. He stared, stricken with horror, and suddenly fled—fled like

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the wind away from the fierce and bestial temptation to revel in a killing.

And as he ran he heard men—aye, and women too, shouting, "*Meluelimou! Le Lâche!*" (The Coward!)

## CHAPTER XIX

### HEART OF A WOMAN

PAUL was running about from one man to another, while Peshu staggered away, somewhat sobered. Ahteck's partner was crazed with anger and shook his fist in people's faces. He was beside himself, torn and hurt by the awful words that had been spat out at the man he simply worshiped.

"I tell you that he is no coward!" he was yelling. "He is the bravest one among you all. He could have killed Peshu!"

"But he ran," said a woman, grimly. "Ran like an *ahtum*, like a cur that is pelted with stones!"

Whereat Paul was overwhelmed with woe, and a small hand was placed in pity on his arm, and through his blurred eyes he saw the daughter of Pilon, little Marie, who shared his sorrow and sought to comfort him.

In the meanwhile Uapukun was hurrying home

with Mititesh, having found her weeping in the darkness, on the road that passes in front of the red barn, and seized her hand. They were both hastening away while over the happy crowd had fallen a pall that wrapped it up in dark folds, for Ahtech had always been deemed a great man among them and now their divinity had shown feet of clay. The mighty had fallen, and the little bride was weeping on her husband's shoulder.

Uapukun was soon compelled to slow her gait, for her poor overburdened heart was beating wildly. Yet she endeavored to keep on, with one hand pressed to the bosom which had already suffered so many wounds, and in which there was now an indescribable pain. Oh! Would the consequence of her action, done in ignorance and under the resistless temptation of great love, never cease to punish her in the person of her great boy, of the son she worshiped with the love that passeth understanding?

She was bowed down with sorrow; her form early bent by the weight of years too heavily laden with pain, was now like that of a very old woman, though she was not yet fifty. But at her side

Mititesh seemed to have grown in stature, walking erect, well-nigh defiantly. She understood the grief of the older woman, at least in part, and shared it in full measure.

She also had been stricken with awe, amazed with a great wonder. Nothing as to the first cause of these dreadful things had ever been known to her, since their secret was locked up in the hearts of Ahtech and his mother, shared also by one kindly old priest who prayed for them. But now she was a woman, a woman who loved with all her heart and soul, one to whom the man who held her being in the hollow of his hand would ever be great and strong, a man needing no condoning, one to whom every instinct of her beautiful womanhood drew her, irresistibly, with a power such as that of mighty waterfalls, or of the fires of heaven that come down and shatter lofty pines or play havoc with the summits of mountains.

She was eager to get to him, for he was not only the man she loved, but also a brother to her, in whose house she had been welcomed, who had ever treated her kindly, like a beloved child, who had carried her out of the wilderness when she was

starving and had prayed over the bodies of her people. Hers was now the instinct of all that is best and most noble in woman, the longing to cherish and console, to bear burdens for others.

What if his hand had waved her aside? What if he had of late even seemed to shun her, and had declared to his mother that his heart held no love for her? She loved him still, more strongly than ever since he had suffered in defending her. She would always love him and cling to him with all the power of her strong young body, with all the might of her brave heart and gentle soul!

She continued to hold the older woman's hand as if the bond of their common love had brought them nearer than ever before, both eager to bear their share of the weight of the cross that rested so crushingly upon those tremendous shoulders.

They found him within the little house, sitting dejectedly in the darkness, his arms sprawling on the table before him, his head bowed down upon them. But he sat up when they entered the room, and as his mother placed her hand upon his shoulder, after lighting the small lamp, he lifted up his bruised face and sought to smile, a brave,

strong, quiet smile. He knew he had no need to explain anything to her.

But Mititesh threw herself down, kneeling on the floor before him and seeking one of his hands.

"Oh! Ah-teck! I beg thy forgiveness!" she cried. "I should not have tried to go away from the dancing. It has been my fault and my punishment to have thee drawn into this quarrel. I ask thy pardon!"

At her the man also smiled. He had never thought to blame her in any way for what had happened. If any one were at fault it was himself, or rather, as he believed, the evil influences that always surrounded him. In his heart he had begun to realize fully that Mititesh loved him, and felt his own passion surging like fire through his veins. But he firmly believed that he must escape from it, run away before it as he had already done before Peshu, because every fiber of his being was striving against him and tempting him beyond his strength.

And this was the beginning of the real torture. He felt that he could never continue to see her about him every day; that he could not keep on

living in the same house with her, knowing that she would be sleeping behind that partition, her bosom rising and falling, as it had done beside him in the great northland woods, while his own heart would hammer at his ribs and his head would be on fire. He had but to open his arms—he knew it well—and she would come to them, with a cry of joy. But all this was but a terrible temptation to lure him so that, by dragging her in his own fate, he might more surely be destroyed.

"Surely there is no forgiveness needed from me, little Mititesh," he said slowly. "In what thou didst there was no thought to offend. I have it in mind that I was the one to hurt thee and therefore I am the one to ask thy pardon. But I am as a brother to thee, and thou as a very dear sister to me, and never in all these years has there been any need of forgiveness between us, for we have always been the best of friends. Go to thy bed now, Mititesh, and let not these things spoil thy sleep, for they are over with now, and if God wills may be soon forgotten."

The girl rose and stood before him, hesitating

for a moment. Then she left the room, with unsteady footsteps, and after she was gone Uapukun spoke.

"Oh! My son!" she whispered, eagerly, "why keep on throwing to one side the happiness that might be thine? Why continue in such suffering, breaking the child's heart and perhaps bringing sorrow to thy mother?"

"It may be that the people were right when they cried out against me for a coward," he answered. "And yet I feel it in my heart that I would be the greater coward if I dragged her into a punishment that I alone have earned. I have decided, after much thinking. I will leave and go to other places far away. The land is very great and wide over which fur may be taken, and there is a big world in which there is need of the arms of strong men."

At this Uapukun rose. If her figure had been bent and looked old under the pressure of sorrow and pain it was now erect again as in the days of her youth. She was once more like the brave woman whose courage had allowed her to flee through a vast wilderness and affront starvation and death in her indomitable resolve to escape from an object of hatred.

"Art thou indeed my great son Ahteck?" she asked, placing her hand upon his shoulder. "Wouldst thou leave us to suffer alone? Thou art not the only one that has borne pain. My poor breast that once fed thee to thy wondrous strength has also felt pangs! Who knows better than I how salt and bitter are the tears that keep on flowing year after year? And I also know the heart of a woman, to which thou art blind! Thou wouldst be a coward indeed to forbid those who love thee to share thy danger! The girl Mititesh whose coming brought rays of happiness into this house of grief is strong to endure and strong to love. I, Uapukun, the mother who bore thee, forbid thee however great and strong thou art to leave her without giving her a choice, I go to call her!"

Ahteck put up his hand, protesting, seeking to prevent her from doing this thing, but it was in vain for she passed him, proud and erect as he had not seen her for some years, and went to the girl's little room.

Mititesh was not yet undressed. She was kneeling, with her face resting upon her joined hands, at the side of her bed.

"Come with me, Mititesh," said the mother. "I want thee."

Hand in hand they entered the living room, where Ahteck still sat at the little table and looked at them in awe.

"Mititesh," said Uapukun. "I must speak to thee. I have long watched the growing of thy love for my son."

"Thy son!" cried the girl.

"Ay, I am the mother who bore him."

Mititesh kept silent. Her head hung low; she was afraid with a great vague fear.

"And I also know that my son loves thee. But there is a terrible thing that makes him want to leave us, to go away to other lands, to pass out of our lives."

"Mother!" exclaimed Ahteck. "What is the use of such words. My fate can never be changed. Nothing can ever take away the things that were done years ago!"

But Uapukun waved him aside, heedless of what he said. It seemed as if he were no longer her big son, the head of the family, the man whose word was law to which all owed obedience, but

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still a small boy over which she had authority as in the days of his childhood.

"I am speaking," she said, calmly, "and you both must hear. Mititesh, I must tell thee now that many years ago Ahtech slew a man, and the man was his father! But Ahtech did not know this, and killed him to save me from harm. Yet the man was his father! I was also guilty of a great sin, telling others that the child was my brother. It was a great wrong, for which I have suffered, and I seek no excuse. There was a man who truly loved me, and I feared to tell him the truth. His memory is blessed in my heart. The deed was done, and Ahtech since then has always believed that a great punishment must come, and this may be true. No one can say that it is not, even at this moment, ready to fall upon us! It is a fearful thing, is it not? For a moment, Mititesh, I saw thee shrink as I spoke. Ahtech says he will never drag a woman he loves into the fate that is hanging over him. But he knows nothing of that which lies in a woman's heart. How great, O Mititesh, is thine?"

The girl stared at her and then, turning to Ah-

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teck, threw herself at his feet, her voice trembling with a great emotion, her eyes appealing to him.

"I know not how great my love is," she cried. "How may a woman ever know? But surely I hunger to take upon me thy punishment. For love of thee I would suffer all the pains of this world and the anguish of hell that I might give thee happiness!"

"That is a real woman's heart," said Uapukun.

Ahteck rose, very unsteadily. His breast was torn and his resolution faltering. Before the greatness of such love he felt as weak as a little child.

But he suddenly ran off to the door.

"Oh! Do not tempt me!" he cried. "It is more than I can bear. A fire is burning in my head! I must think! Indeed I love thee, Miti-tesh, but there is a terrible fear in my heart lest some evil may befall thee! I would bear my punishment alone!"

He went out of the house, running blindly away, he knew not whither, while the two women fell into each other's arms, weeping.

All night the man wandered, first on the silent road, then on the rock-strewn beach, looking into

the glittering heavens for a portent, listening to the lapping of waves upon the shore, harkening to the whispering leaves of aspens, as if some mysterious sound or the falling of a star might have told him which way to turn.

He looked at the shining path of the moonlight upon the vast waters, and at the stars overhead. Sitting upon a boulder rounded by centuries of ice, he held his throbbing head in his hands, seeking in vain to solve the unknown. He was after all but a poor ignorant savage, wise indeed in the mysterious ways of the wilderness, innocent as to the ways of men, touched by civilization just enough to complicate the difficulties before him, while the manner of his thoughts was influenced by dim notions of heathen lore.

Most of the latter represented life as a fierce, unending struggle between rival powers whose unchained forces swept men and things aside, like dead leaves before a gale, helpless, irresponsible, with no ability to do aught but suffer and succumb. The man was blown about with them, and twisted into their eddies; uplifted at times to the tree-tops and then cast down again, ruthlessly, until the anger of the powers of evil should have

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exhausted itself upon him before turning on others. And he believed that such things would continue throughout the ages to come, the bodies of fallen leaves and men making soil whereupon others would grow in turn, to strive for a time and die at last in unequal combat.

All this was hardly shaped in his mind; it was but a dark instinctive inheritance acquired from generations that had gone before, like the force that draws the whelp to the dugs of its mother, like the turning of some flowers towards the light of the sun.

Finally came the hours of the early morning, and he still sat there weakened by the long struggle, with no will of his own, content to let himself drift away with any current that might seize him. He would contend no more, for he had become as a small child that seeks comfort. He would return to his house and allow the women to point out the way to him, for he could no longer find the trail alone.

They would take him by the hand and lead him and, perchance, they would be able to guide him out of the shaking bog into which he had sunk and bring him out into the open, upon hard ground

that would no longer quake under him. He was like a man awakening from a prolonged fever, whose delirium has sapped his will and strength until nothing remains but a sense of weakness and a shaken spirit.

He rose, with limbs stiffened by inaction, his clothing wet and clinging with the dew. A great peace had come upon him, but it was not happiness. There was nothing in him of the groom hastening to his bride, of the man going forth to some place wherein he will find a great joy that may be his for the asking—nay, that others are eager to thrust upon him.

In his aimless wandering he had gone quite far. He found himself a long way west of the reservation, on the road towards St. Félicien, and would be compelled to pass through nearly the whole length of the Indian village before he could reach his home.

Cocks were beginning to crow, sending forth their challenges, and the few cattle in the small pastures dotted with stumps were heavily rising to their feet and beginning to seek the best herbage. A few lank dogs came from retreats beneath the houses, stretched out their limbs and, with noses

to the ground, resumed their ever unavailing search for something that might be good to eat. Some of them barked at him. Further on a cat crossed the road hurriedly, sneaking back after an all-night hunt, with something in its mouth. Some sparrows began to chirp.

Ahteck walked on, slowly, seeing little that was before him, moving after the dull fashion of a man after a drunken sleep. He passed before a small house. Near the front door, which was wide open, stood a clumsy wooden bench, and upon this a bright tin basin. A man was in front of it, washing his face and scrubbing it with a coarse towel. It was his partner Paul.

The man upset the basin, dashed out into the road, and caught Ahteck by the arm, dragging him, unresisting, into the house where an old woman was pottering over a stove.

"Tea, mother!" he cried. "Make it strong and black, and plenty of it. Here is that great fool Ahteck! God only knows where he has been. Look at thyself, man, with thy bedraggled clothes that were thy best. And thy face, with one eye closed and all swollen and black. Thou poor devil, but it makes my heart sore to look at thee!"

Sit down here, close to the fire. Thou hast surely been wandering all night like an old she-cat that is looking for her young that have been drowned, and the mosquitoes have bitten thee until I would not have known thee but for thy bigness, that is as great as thy folly. Pardon me, I do not mean to offend thee, but after all that has happened I am half crazy myself. Sit down, I tell thee, and drink hot tea. Nearer the stove, for thy teeth are chattering!"

Paul was bustling around him, excitedly, hardly knowing what he was saying, while the old mother hurried to serve his friend, whom she loved greatly because he was the man who had caused her son to prosper so that he had been able once more to put a roof over her head.

In this kindly atmosphere Ahteck felt again like a man who is recovering from a great sickness and to whom the world is beginning to look a little brighter. The affection and the care of these good people was like a balm that was being poured over his wounds. A pleasant sensation of languor came over him, as when a convalescent knows that eager hopes may at last be fulfilled.

"As soon as we shall have eaten," said Paul,

"we will go over to thy house. I will hitch up the little mare, that is growing fat and lazy with too much idleness. Thou shalt not be allowed to walk and show that face of thine to all."

With the tact of instinctive kindness he forbore to speak of the happenings of the previous night. But he was still full of wonder. It seemed so amazing, so utterly unexplainable that Ahteck had not shown then, as he always had before, how mightier he was than all other men. Peshu! Why, the man would have been crushed by a single blow! It passed the good fellow's understanding, but his friendship and his devotion were as great as ever. He had not the slightest doubt that over Ahteck some strange spell had fallen, as happens when men go mad or young dogs suddenly froth at the mouth, in convulsions.

But Ahteck would not hear of Paul's offer. He had, apparently, quite recovered his habitual calm way of confronting difficulties.

"I will walk over there," he said. "I am the same man that I was. These people who cried out that I was a coward were all friends at one time. I care not if they are turned into enemies now, but I believe many will still be friends. My

life is to be spent among them, they will see my face every day, I will not turn it away from them now. I have borne in my life much greater shame and sorrow, though it was all in my heart and hidden from others. They may laugh if they will."

Paul sought to make him alter his decision but, failing, rose after a time to go with him. The morning was advancing; upon the road stood men, idly, smoking their pipes and talking together. Women were beginning to come out of tents and houses, those fortunate enough to own a cow carrying milk-pails. Children were loitering about or playing, ready to pay heed when the school-bell should call them. Ah! Those people would be made to see that he, Paul Barotte, was not the man to forsake his old friend, that he would never desert his partner!

They started and walked along, Ahteck as erect as ever, towering above the smaller companion who was seeking to protect him. He was trying to avoid no man's eyes, and kept on quietly, with long strides, as was his wont. Men stared at him and kept on looking after they had gone by. Those who chanced to pass near him nodded as usual, and they answered his *bonjour* just as

formerly, but they turned after the giant had passed.

There were also many women, young and old, who saw his swollen face. Generally they appeared to be sorry for him. One or two young girls giggled in silly fashion, and then stopped as if somewhat ashamed of themselves. Children put their heads together and whispered, but though they pointed him out to each other he was evidently no object of mirth to them. He was so very big and walked so straight that they stood in awe of him.

But none of these things, at least outwardly, seemed to affect Ahteck at all. It is likely that it was a hardship as great as any he had borne before, but he could stand it as long as he thought he was alone to suffer the pain. He accepted it in silence, easily, like any other heavy burden, while Paul strode behind him, looking somewhat truculent, staring into people's eyes defiantly.

They finally reached the little house and entered it. The two women were there, waiting, their faces showing marks of the long hard vigil spent hand in hand, in silent grief, not knowing

what had become of Ahtech or whether they would ever see him again.

"At last thou hast returned," said Uapukun, sighing with relief.

Ahtech went to her, taking her hands.

"All is right with me now," he said. "I had food with Paul at his house. He is a good friend. I am sorry that I gave you both so much worry."

Then he turned to the girl, who was watching him with a beating heart, as a prisoner before a court of justice may look at twelve men returning from settling his fate, not knowing whether their word will set him free or send him to his doom. She was shrinking, in fear, with one hand held out behind her and resting upon the table, as if she felt she might need the support it offered.

"Mititesh," he said, and gently placed a hand upon her shoulder, "I think that the trail is clear, so that we may see some distance ahead, but we know nothing of what lies beyond. It is a new country, and I fear that it holds evil for us. But if thou art willing to travel it with me, and it is still in thy mind to cling to me who was called a

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coward before all, I shall accept thy great gift. At once I will go and see Father Laroux and seek his counsel."

Mititesh rose to her full stature. A new light was in her eyes; her bosom panted with emotion.

"Go," she said, "go to him, Ahteck, and return when he shall have decided. Thou wilt find me ready to cling to thee, to serve thee while I pray that no evil ever comes to thee that I may not share!"

She rested both hands on his breast, looking into his eyes, her own lighted with the joy and the wondrous power that makes women, all the world over, reck nothing of coming pain if it be the price of love and devotion.

## CHAPTER XX

### OUT OF THE STORM

PAUL had looked upon this scene with amazement. He had pulled off his woolen cap and scratched his head. As he knew nothing of underlying causes it was a mystery to him. When they walked out of the house together he kept silent for a moment, but could resist no longer his keen desire to speak frankly.

"For years I have known thee, Ah-teck," he declared, "and have always wondered at thy silent ways and thy beliefs in coming evils, but now I must say that I can only wonder at thy amazing folly. Is there a man in Pointe Bleue, among those who have not wives already, who would not give all he has for the love of a woman like Miti-tesh? And now thou art going to see the priest and arrange for thy wedding, with thy face as black as a thunder-cloud and thy manner that of a man about to bury his best beloved one. Indeed I cannot understand thee."

But Ahtech made no answer. It may well be that he had not even listened to his friend. They reached the house of the missionaries, mounting the steps to the veranda, on which were many chairs of queerly twisted roots and branches, made by one of the fathers. When they knocked at the door one of the priests opened it and bade them welcome.

"My father, I have come to speak with Father Laroux," said Ahtech.

"He has been called away to the bedside of a woman who is very ill," answered the priest. "Is there anything I may be able to do for thee?"

"I thank you, Father, but I want to see him. Always he has heard my confession and I seek his help."

"It is well, my son. Return later in the day and thou wilt find him. But first I have something to say. I have heard of the brawl yesterday and thy face shows but too plainly the injury inflicted upon thee. Thou hast always been a man of peace, and a sober one, never touching strong drink. It is because I know thee so well that I have wondered whether a temptation did not come upon thee to kill that man Peshu, and

whether thy strength was not so great that thou wert able to flee from such a crime?"

A smile of happiness lighted up the poor bruised face. Here was a kind and godly man who had found no words to condemn and appeared to know how greatly the hunter had suffered in his pride, how keenly he had felt the awful blow of being proclaimed a coward before all, the fiercest insult a man may ever be offered.

"It is true that I was tempted, Father," he answered. "I knew that if I did not run away I would kill the man."

"I thought so," said the priest. "There remains only for thee to offer up thy injuries to God as a sacrifice in His Holy Name, and I will certainly pray that all blessings may come down on thee and thy people. Always have I known thee as a good man and a kind one to his folk."

An immense feeling of contentment had come over Ahtek. As for Paul, the man could have shouted out his joy, for now, in his eyes, his friend was absolved of all fault.

The priest closed the door, softly, and left the two young men standing there, before the lintel over which had been written in large letters the

word *Statomiskatinou*, the Montagnais expression of welcome and good wishes. Paul smote his friend a great blow on the back.

"Ah, now everything is right again!" he exclaimed. "I shall see to it that all these people know what the good father has said. It will be a shame on them. Ay, they will soon know!"

Ahtek quietly nodded. He was well pleased but still remained very thoughtful, for he knew that it was only the thing of least import that had been settled. It amounted to no more than a small stone that might have been swept from his path, and there were still great boulders to be removed. He did not know whether the good priest to whom he had confessed, and who had never been able to grant him plenary absolution, would consent to marry a man over whose life there hung the black shadow of a murder—of the murder of his own father.

For a few minutes they went into the little church, for a short prayer before the One who had been crucified. After this they returned to the house where Paul triumphantly narrated all that the priest had said. He danced about the room while Uapukun smiled happily and Mititesh, as

she looked at Ahteck, felt that in her heart he was constantly becoming greater.

The gate of the little enclosure clicked and Paul looked out of the window, announcing that the Hudson's Bay agent was coming in. He was a fine fellow, and had always liked the two young hunters who brought in such fine catches of peltry and with whom there never was any talk of debt.

"*Bonjour,*" he said to the company, wiping his forehead with a handkerchief, for the weather was getting hot and sultry.

"*Bonjour, bonjour,*" they all answered, while Uapukun hastened to dust a chair for him with her apron.

"Thank you, I can only stay for a moment. That was a fine lot of skins you two lads brought in this time, and I am glad prices have been good. I came to see thee, Ahteck, since thou art so handy with thy tools. My small sail-boat needs a new rudder-post; come with me and look at it. The boat has been drawn up on the shore. But perhaps thou dost not feel like working to-day. I have heard all about this thing that happened. Why didst thou not knock Peshu's head off, a worthless one who spends in drink that which

should go towards paying his debt? I think I know who has been selling the stuff around here, of late, and some day he will be bundled off to jail."

But Ahteck did not answer his question.

"I can work," he replied. "I will go and look at the little sailboat and if I can mend it I will attend to it at once. Thou hast done me many favors I do not forget. But we are about to eat. Wilt thou not sit down with us?"

But the agent declined the invitation, politely, explaining that his wife was waiting for him.

"There is no hurry," he said. "Come as soon as thou art ready."

A half an hour later Ahteck, after finishing his midday meal, and still followed by Paul, who remained at his heels like a faithful dog, went over to the Post, but a few hundred yards away.

"It is becoming terribly hot," said Paul, wiping his brow with the back of his hand. "There is not a breath of wind, and look at the great black clouds that are piling up in the northwest."

Ahteck looked up.

"Yes, it is the coming of a storm," he said, indifferently. "A big storm of wind, with thunder

and lightning. The wheat and oats are not yet high enough to be harmed. It will pass like others."

They walked on, in the sultry heat, without paying further heed. Big storms are common enough in summertime on the great lake.

When they reached the Post the agent met them at the door.

"I saw you coming," he said. "We will go down on the beach and look at the boat."

He walked out with them, lighting his pipe, and soon Ahteck was at work, looking over the damage and taking careful measurements.

"I have a fine piece of oak," he said. "It will be just right. I can soon have the boat ready."

"That is good," said the agent. "I am glad I am not out on the lake with it now. How black the sky has grown, and the heat is such as we have not felt this summer! The flies are pestering badly. Just look at that!"

The darkness that was advancing fast was rent by a tremendous flash of lightning, and all at once the wind rose, in wide black flaws spotting the slaty surface of the waters. Then came a crashing peal of thunder with the blowing of heavy gusts

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that twisted clouds of dust upon the road. Women were rushing out of houses to rescue clothing hanging on the lines. Dogs were sneaking off for the protection they could find under the houses, and the cows, lowing, turned their backs to the gale. Big drops of rain began to fall and those spots on the lake that had been still and leaden in hue became, like the rest of the great sheet, as white as spume, in a long line extending as far as the eye could reach.

Paul had been staring over the lake.

"Mother of Heaven!" he cried. "Is there not a canoe out yonder?"

The other two men glanced along his extended arm and saw it at once. Hardly more than a mile away the frail thing was driving towards shore, pushed by the sweep of the gale.

"I cannot tell who they are," said Ahtech. "They come bow on. Ah! I saw them well that time, with the lightning. There are three paddles. It—it is surely no canoe of Pointe Bleue!"

Other men were coming down the beach, by this time, and watching while they held their hands up to their brows to keep the pelting rain

out of their eyes. It was only at intervals that one could see the canoe, between the fierce gusts, and then it would disappear as if blotted out. After a breathless moment they would again see the uplifted bow riding high on the crest of a wave, to sink again in the trough of the following seas.

"They are men who know how to handle a canoe. God help them!" cried the agent.

"See the height of the bow!" shouted an Indian. "It is a big canoe, and not one of our country."

"I have seen many such ones north of Grand Lac!" yelled an ancient *voyageur*.

Ahteck was staring at it, dashing the water from his face with the knuckles of his hand. Yes, he knew that kind of canoe. Many were those he had seen in the region of Grand Mistassini, in those days when the greatest storm of them all had burst upon his head. They were big high-bowed things suited for use upon tremendous lakes and on great rivers that had few portages, and were able to stand a fair sea. None of the smaller canoes of Lake St. John would still have been riding such billows as raged by this time.

They were coming nearer fast, and the watchers knew that these were strong men of great skill in the handling of their frail shell. Yet it seemed to them that the travelers were doomed, and the men on shore went down to where the waves were bursting at their feet, knowing that if the canoe reached the shore it must be dashed to pieces on the stony beach. There was a possible chance of being able to drag the men out of that seething flood, if the canoe survived the seas for a few minutes more.

By this time some women had come down too, and also children, and shrieks of terror came from them. Some made the sign of the cross, uttering hurried prayers and frightened exclamations that were interrupted by gasping breaths when the canoe seemed about to be overwhelmed.

Nearer and near still came the strangers, working in desperation, until at last the canoe was within fifty yards from shore, riding deep, for there was much water in it. Then it was uplifted again on the crest of a great combing wave, shot forward, sank down again, and the following bilow curled up high, roaring, to fall with mighty force upon the stern, which slewed around, buried

in the smother. Then the canoe disappeared again, this time rolling in the trough and coming up again, bottom up, with two men still clinging desperately to it as it drifted in fast.

Ahtech had thrown off his coat and shaken off his moccasins on the beach. With a great leap he was in the waves, battling fiercely, with tremendous sweeping strokes of his great arms, with the ferocity of motion of some wild beast battling for its young. Never before had his formidable strength been exerted to its utmost, as now. To him it was a mighty joy to war against these forces, as he knew he could have done against the man who had brought shame upon him. There was nothing to restrain him now—no law of God or fear of Manitou would hold him back!

He redoubled his efforts as he saw, a few yards away, the bobbing head of the man he was trying to save, who had been unable to cling to the canoe. The waves were tossing him about like some trivial plaything, and he made a few unavailing motions of his arms. Few northern Indians can swim, owing to the short warm season and the icy waters. That head sank out of reach as Ahtech was about to grasp the long hair, but he dived, forcing him-

self under the surface with the utmost of his power.

He felt a piece of garment and seized it, but in a second two arms were about him, locked in the despair of impending death. The turmoil of the waters lifted them to the surface again, so that Ahtech caught a gasping breath. With a savage effort he tore himself away, clutched the back of the man's shirt, and sought to reach the shore.

A few great waves caught them, uplifted them, flung them on, retreated again with them, and finally cast them with a crash at the feet of the waiting mob. Paul had run waist deep in the water and others had followed him, who grasped at the men and pulled them in. Ahtech was unconscious, with a great gash upon his head, and the other, a very tall Indian with hair silvering over the temples, was dazed and apparently unable to realize that which had happened.

The two men who had clung to the upturned canoe had drifted in fast, submerged most of the time as their craft rolled in the trough. There was no lack of strong hunters to receive them, however, men who took desperate chances of being carried off their feet by the incoming rollers. One

of the men was seized by the foot and drawn in, the other let go as the canoe was battered against the stones and flung up high, and a receding wave carried him off. But again he was borne in and a man with a rope about his waist, held by others, pounced upon him and dragged him to safety.

At this time the agent addressed the old man in French, but he shook his head, evidently not understanding a word. After this they tried Montagnais and his features expanded in a foolish smile. Then, in a low voice, he spoke, without replying to the questions addressed to him.

"I have lost my *shpuagan*, my pipe, a very good pipe it was. And this is a great storm, a *meshte lutits*, and nowhere can I find my pipe. I gave a fine skin of *atshukash*, of mink, for it."

The Indians were quick to notice a slight difference of accent and speech in his words, but they had no trouble in understanding him, and touched their brows with their fingers, realizing that there was some trouble with the man's brain.

"It was very fine fur we brought with us. There was *Uapishtan*, martens of the very best, and *Mitsheshu*, fox in great plenty, and very many other kinds. And now I fear it is all lost, as is

my *passigan*, my gun, and all our things, and the canoe is all in pieces, and this be surely a wonderful place of many men living in great tents of boards."

He pointed to a cow grazing in a distant field.

"The moose of this land are different from ours, and are not feared of men, and little children go among them. It is wonderful indeed. But the pelts were very fine and now all are lost, and how shall I smoke without a pipe?"

He continued to bewail his losses, childishly, as they carried him up to the Post, for his legs were very shaky. His two companions had already been taken there and were sitting on a bench, shivering under the blankets in which they had been wrapped. Then the men arrived who carried Ahteck, and the little store was crowded with people.

"Run, some of you!" cried the agent. "A short time ago I saw the doctor going by. He is likely to be with the man Labiche, the one who cut his foot with an axe. Run fast, I tell you, and bring him back at once to see big Ahteck. Tell him that the man may be dying here! Hurry as fast as you can!"

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Two or three departed on this errand, racing down the long road. Ahtech had been placed on the floor, and his head was still bleeding a good deal. His friend Paul knelt beside him, almost distracted, imploring him to speak.

By good fortune the doctor was soon found, arriving in a few minutes. He was the Government physician of the reservation, an intelligent young man.

"What's this?" he exclaimed. "A drowned man, they tell me! He is not drowned at all, see how he breathes. Why! It is that great lad Ahtech!"

With the readiness of a man accustomed to rely on his own resources and to act quickly he looked about him and saw some bottles of ammonia on the shelves. He caught up one of them and opening it held it up to Ahtech's nose. There were a few rapid breaths, and the prostrate man lifted up his hand and tried to push the doctor's arm away.

"Thou hast enough, eh!" exclaimed the doctor. "It is strong stuff indeed. Don't try to sit up yet, thou big fool. Lie down quietly till I look at thy cracked head."

But Ahtech was feeling fairly strong again, for it had been but a knockout blow. He insisted on sitting up until his wound was dressed and his head done up in a bandage.

"It will be nothing," announced the doctor, cheerfully. "Thou hast a good hard head to stand a tussle with the beach. A brave fellow thou art, and I am glad that all will be well with thee."

At this moment came in some men bearing a couple of heavy bales dripping with water.

"One of these was tied in the canoe that was broken to pieces," said one of them. "The big waves rolled up the other one on the shore."

The old man whom Ahtech had rescued at the peril of his life came forward, grinning happily.

"It is the fur we brought many weeks' journey," he said. "There are many good pelts and it is good that they are found, but I fear my pipe is gone. Perhaps some good man will give me another, and a trifle of tobacco. My *tshishtemau* is all wet.

He showed a little sodden tobacco at the bottom of a leathern pouch, and the agent handed him a new pipe and a small plug, after which the man seemed perfectly happy. He turned his head

about and looked at the assembled people in a quiet, contented way, while bystanders observed him, with the awe and respect Indians always show to the demented.

"Something wrong in the old fellow's head, I think," commented the doctor. "How do you feel, my friend?"

But the old fellow shook his head, not understanding French, and went over to the bales of fur.

"It is a fine lot of pelts," he said. "We must dry them carefully again. They will be all right then."

At this time one of the other men who had been saved spoke, and Paul took upon himself the office of interpreter, for the doctor had but a scanty knowledge of Montagnais.

"He is saying that the old man is always thus. He says it is a good many years since he has been that way, yet he is still a very strong man with the paddle and good over the portage, carrying big loads. They say he was the strongest man they ever knew, and even now no one is better with the traps and the deadfalls. He catches much fur."

By this time people were paying no longer any attention to Ahteck, who had risen to his feet and was listening also.

"This man says," continued Paul, "that on Grand Lac this old hunter became so, all in one day. He is still good at the hunting, but he often speaks foolishly. Never does he say things just like other men."

By this time Ahteck was staring, his uninjured eye widely open and his breath coming in great jerks, as if the furious waters of the lake had still been opening and closing over his head, that throbbed and made him think himself in prey to some strange delusion.

The case was an interesting one, and the doctor's professional curiosity was strongly aroused. He was about to ask for further details when the agent spoke.

"There are too many of you here," he said to the crowd, good humoredly. "The storm is over now and the sun is beginning to shine."

The room was partially cleared. Ahteck looked through the door, that had been left wide open. He saw that the blackness of the great clouds had given place to brightness while the air

was pure and clean after the terrible downpour. As the last of the onlookers filed out Uapukun and Mititesh arrived, out of breath from fast running. The older woman's voice faltered.

"Oh! Ahtech! Thou art not dead!" she cried, stammering in the excess of her joy.

But Mititesh grasped his arm, unable to say a word, for people had called out to them that he might be dying. She felt his big arms and placed her hands on his shoulders, as if to make sure that she had not really been bereft of him.

Ahtech pressed her hand, gently, but turned to his mother. In his eyes she saw an expression of bewilderment. It was as if he had been growing crazy from the blow he had received on his head. He grasped her arm, quickly.

"Look, mother, look at the old man!" he said in a low, raucous voice that was shaking. "That is the man I brought ashore, who was drowning. Look at him! Look well! Search thy memory! Either thou must remember him or I am mad. Look carefully, mother, for I know not if my head is right. Look at the old man!"

But the doctor was speaking, eager to learn more.

"This is very remarkable," he said. "Quite an unusual case. Paul, try to find out from these people just what happened at Grand Lac when this thing occurred and the old man became foolish."

"This man says," began Paul, after he had asked some questions, "that some people of his tribe went to Grand Lac, seven summers ago, because they had heard that the price of fur was good there, and it was not so far for them to go as to the great factory on the big salt water. Some women they had with them, and also children, but some were feeling frightened when they went there, because—"

"Because what?"

Paul looked embarrassed. He hesitated on account of the dislike men of his race have for speaking before white men of some things that the fathers condemned as savoring of paganism.

"It—it is a foolishness of Indians who have never heard the real truth from the fathers. They are things our people believed many years ago before the missionaries came. These men come from a very far country where there are no priests."

"But tell us, what was it!"

"Well, this man tells me there was a *jongleur*, a medicine man, him we call *Ka Kushapatak*, of those who work under the *wabano*, the tent of many poles covered with bark and many boughs. And when the frame was built, and before it was all covered with the boughs, it was so strong that two men could not shake the poles, trying as hard as they could. Then it was all covered up, but the *jongleur* stood to one side while this was done, that his hands might not touch it. After the boughs had all been placed on the frame he went in alone, a man of many years and not strong, and in a moment the poles shook and the *wabano* swayed as the two strong men had utterly failed to make them, in the slightest. And then, from the *wabano* there came voices, strange voices as of several men, young and old, and one of them, speaking alone, said that it would be very evil to go to Grand Lac."

"Yes, and then?" asked the doctor.

"And then he says that this man, who is now white haired though not of very many years, laughed in scorn and said he did not believe the *jongleur*, and he did not care even if *Matshi Manitou*, who is the same as the devil, said so.

He was going, and those afraid could stay behind. They talked much about this matter among themselves, and at last but a few started away with him, in the long canoes, with much fur."

"And then what happened?"

"He says they traveled nearly a month to Grand Lac. And there they got good prices for their fur, after a few days of talk, and they wanted to leave at once because of what the medicine man had said. But this old man laughed at them and made them stay another day, though they were ready to start. After the sun had gone down he went out of his tent and behind the big log houses and did not return even though the sun would soon rise. So then they feared something had happened to him and they went to look. And they met him in the very early hours, and he was crawling on his hands and knees, and his head was broken, and when he opened his mouth to speak it was all foolishness. Then these people knew that the evil that the *jongleur* had spoken of had come, as was threatened, and so they pulled up their tents at once, and put him in the bottom of one of the canoes, leaving at once for the fear that

was upon them that other bad things might happen."

"Extremely interesting," commented the doctor. "And why do they come here now?"

"He says that a man told them the prices of fur were even better here than at Grand Lac, on account of the many who buy, but of course they have never returned to Grand Lac. He says that this time the medicine man went into the *wabano* again, and the voices said the traveling would be good. But these men," continued Paul, "are very ignorant, without much wisdom of the things that are right, such as the priests tell us. They believe in foolish things."

At this time the woman Uapukun, who had been hanging upon the shoulder of her big son as if she had been ready to fall, staggered over to the old man and grasped one of his shoulders.

"Thou art surely the man *Nitsouk*, the otter, a man from the Nascaupees that trap about the shores of Michigamau," she cried.

"I am very certainly the man Nitsouk, and a Nascaupee," he answered, smiling in a silly fashion. "And my fur is very good, after it shall

have been well dried out. It is good fur that has been well stretched, and now that the sun shines we must take the bales apart and dry it at once, for fear of the mildew."

"I—I will take these men to my house," said Ahteck. "I can give them clothes that are dry and I have a tent they may take. There is room to camp by the roadside. In the open they may dry their fur. I will help."

He swung one of the big bales to his shoulder, and the two younger men among the strangers took the others and followed Ahteck. A good many people had gathered around again, outside, wishing to look at these travelers, and many followed them as they walked away.

But upon the road, suddenly, they came upon Peshu. Ahteck went towards him, quietly, and Peshu drew his knife, for now he was afraid for his life. But Ahteck, having cast down the bale, seized his arm like a flash, and bent it down so that the knife fell from his grasp and dropped to the ground.

"I was not seeking any further quarrel with thee," said Peshu, who had become very unsteady about the knees.

Ahteck loosened his hold on the arm and put out his hand.

"Neither do I seek any quarrel, Peshu," he said. "This, in a way thou canst not understand, is the happiest day of my whole life. I would rather take thy hand in friendship. I would now be the friend of all men on earth!"

Peshu looked at him, greatly amazed; he was uncertain, hesitating to hold out his hand, for it was because of a real fear for his life that he had drawn out his sheath-knife, and he was sober now and knew that before Ahteck he would be like a reed before the gale.

"I am indeed sorry I struck thee so last night," he said, sheepishly. "It was the drink I took that made me do it."

It was in this wise that the two men clasped hands, and that twice in twenty-four hours were the people of Pointe Bleue disappointed in their expectation of seeing them locked in strife.

After they had returned to the house Uapukun, helped by Mititesh, prepared much food, and some old clothing of Ahteck's was found for the Nascaupees. Of the latter, two men made strange figures in them, owing to the fact that they were

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of ordinary stature. But when the older man Nitsouk had put on an old pair of trousers and a coat greatly the worse for wear, his bent form appeared to straighten out with pride, and all could see that he was very nearly as tall as Ahteck.

One of the strangers looked at him and then turned to the younger man, wondering.

"Two such tall men have surely never been seen at one time," he said, "and they surely are like a father and son."

## CHAPTER XXI

### TO MY BELOVED ONE

LATER during the same afternoon Ahteck succeeded in finding Father Laroux at the mission. The good old man wore a pair of *bottes sauvages* and ancient blue overalls, and was digging in the garden he dearly loved to care for. But at once he interrupted his occupation and went indoors with the young man, and they were closeted together for a long time. Finally he placed his thin, blue-veined hands on Ahteck's shoulders.

"God has been merciful indeed to thee, my son. He inflicted on thee punishment such as must come to those who shed a man's blood in anger, but this punishment was only of thy heart and mind, for otherwise His mercy has always caused thee to prosper. Thou hast suffered and repented so greatly that I have been able, with the greatest happiness in my heart, to grant thee a full absolution. Depart now with my blessings, and remain certain that since the girl Mititesh and thou art

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to be wedded I will myself say the mass and unite thee with her in holy bonds. May the Lord ever have you both in his care!"

Paul had been most patiently waiting outside for his friend, smoking many pipes, and it had been all he could do to refrain from bursting, at times, in joyful song.

"I would not know thee," he said, "thou art an utterly different man now. An Ahtech changed in looks by other things than thy black eye and the winding of much white cloth about thy broken head. Never before have I seen thee look like this. It is as if the weight of great mountains had been lifted from thee."

"Ay, there was a time when all the weight of the world must have been upon them," replied Ahtech. "But now I am a man like other men, for the weight has fallen from them."

He breathed a very long breath, as a child does that is just born. It was as if a new and real life had come to him, with all its hopes and promises.

"I am indeed overcome with happiness. I had never thought to know it again but it has come at last," he continued.

"In diving thou must have picked it up from the bottom of the lake," laughed Paul.

"True, the waters of the lake brought it to me," Ahteck answered.

"I see that thou art still a man of many riddles. But I care nothing about that so long as thou wilt cease to crow forever like black *Katshu* the raven, and to keep on making faces as long as a day without bread."

They separated, with a hearty handshake, two men faithful to one another and loving, but Paul called him back, suddenly, as if a new and important matter had come to him.

"Listen," he said, "there is no doubt that the marriage between Mititesh and thou will surely take place, is there?"

It did him good to see the bright look of happiness upon Ahteck's face.

"Thank God," he said, "we will surely marry."

"Then I will say this," began Paul, looking rather bashful. "If I know anything of Mititesh she will surely not allow thee to go alone to the woods for the trapping. Thou knowest that her heart is ever longing for the wild life, perhaps as much as she longs for thee. Another shack

will have to be built. We must carry up another stove, also. I have no mind to live alone, and when I pressed her for an answer, the daughter of Jacques Pilon said she would be glad indeed to winter in the wilderness. A fine stout girl is she, and good with a paddle, and—and we have been long walking together in the evenings, and—and—I know that she and Mititesh are great friends, and—”

“And may good luck ever attend you both,” said Ahteck. “I am glad indeed to hear that thou art going to be happy too. It is a thing well deserved.”

After he had hastened back to the house, his long strides bearing him as if his bliss lent him wings, he found that the Nascaupees had been very busy stretching their pelts out to dry, with the utmost care. They had been so well wrapped up in the bales with many folds of bark that a few only, of the outside and poorest ones, were very wet.

Uapukun had offered a bed in the house to Nitsouk, the Otter, but the old man had refused in no uncertain terms.

“What—I am wanted to sleep in the camp

of boards! It might be that in very cold weather it would be good. I will say that all these people are friendly, and their tobacco is very good, and so is their tea, black and strong and with plenty of *kajouas* to sweeten it. I have drunk many cups, for they are not sparing of it to strangers. But I do not sleep in the big tent of wood. I sleep where there is air in plenty, for I am not *Utshiskou* the muskrat nor *Amishkou* the beaver. But the tea is certainly very good."

He was sitting on the little steps that led into the house, smoking very contentedly, and it was always noticed that he constantly followed Uapukun with his eyes, when she came near. It seemed to give him much comfort.

Came a most wonderful evening, that was scented after the rain with the odor of many wild flowers and bright with a myriad twinkling stars. Ahtech took the hand of the girl Miti-tesh, who looked more beautiful than ever, and led her out upon the road, in the darkness, and thence down to the beach, where little innocent waves lapped the shingle gently, as if the hurricane of the afternoon were a thing that could not possibly ever happen again. At this time the

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whole world would have seemed quite deserted but for the few lights showing merrily from the windows of distant houses. Also the katydids made a sound that was drowsy and yet full of cheer, and some long and slender-winged mosquito-eaters, as the Montagnais call the whippoorwills, cleaved their way through the heavens or else, resting, uttered plaintive notes which, strangely enough, appeared to have an undertone of joy.

Before the man and the maid, as they sat down upon a boulder, there was an immensity of space, and their hearts, beating in unison, filled it all with the pulsing of a life of wondrous beauty.

For a long time they were well-nigh unable to speak. The moment was like that of a first rousing from a terrible night-mare, and they kept very still, as do the half-awakened people who dread the return of terrifying visions.

What could they say? Surely their quickened breaths and their throbbing hearts spoke for them. How could they speak this first time that they held each other, gloriously conscious that now no man or deity would come between them. They were making ready to begin a marvelous journey

into unknown lands, and these seemed to stretch before them, ever so vast and open, to fade away only in an eternity of bliss.

"I thank God," said the man, devoutly, "that he has lifted the curse from my head and that I may now at last hold thee in my arms without fearing that evil may befall thee."

"I thank him also," said the maid, "that my heart will never beat fast again but for the happiness of seeing thee!"

And so they rose and wandered farther along the shore, with few words of love but many kisses, on the road to blessedness, where we perforce must leave them, since the tales of lasting joy can only be written in the hearts of men and women.

But as they turned back towards the little house Mititesh spoke again:

"*Tshil ka shatshiitan!* Oh my beloved one! See how beautifully clear is the sky! It may be that other great storms will come, but they will be as nothing with thy great arms to guide us, and I will follow thee through them without fear, as I would have followed thee before the one that is passed!"

A short month went by, or perhaps it was a very long one, and the church bell pealed very merrily, and all the people at Pointe Bleue had sought out their best clothes, and there was a double wedding at the little church, and a *veillée* that they are still talking about, in the barn which Xavier Papineau lent for the occasion. To the general surprise Ahteck danced all night, as light on his feet as the best of them, till the fiddlers were too weary to draw their bows.

A couple of days later the Nascaupees, who had sold their fur very well, and were greatly pleased, prepared to leave for their own country, for the way was long before them. They had bought a couple of new canoes, for they had much to carry in the way of provisions. Finally everything was ready and the two younger men told the old one to make his pack ready and come with them on the homeward trail. They pointed out that the start must not be further delayed, for already the leaves of birches were beginning to show gold while the maples had started to blush.

But Nitsouk the Otter placidly shook his gray head, looking at Uapukun who had been extremely

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devoted to him, giving him as tender care as if he had been a little child of hers.

"No," he said, very gravely. "These people are very good, and the tea is black and strong, and so is the tobacco."

"Oh! Leave him with me," cried Uapukun. "I will care for him always."

"This woman," pursued the old man, "is also very good, wherefore I will not move from here."

And thus the two Nascauees, who had wives and children waiting for them in the distant North, entered their canoes and returned alone to the Grand Nord.

THE END















